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**A Dysfunctional Family of Export Promotion Service Providers?
Collaborative Governance in a Complex and Fragmented Regional Network**

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Abstract

Compared to policy formation and development, the implementation of International Business policy has received limited scholarly attention. We address this gap by examining how export promotion policy is implemented through an export promotion network (EPN) comprising heterogeneous and independent export promotion service providers operating without hierarchical control or coordination. Drawing on the Collaborative Governance Framework (CGF), we interrogate the governance conditions underpinning policy implementation, focusing on composition, coordination, legitimacy and accountability. Using an extensive qualitative study of the EPN in West Yorkshire, UK, we identify five interrelated themes: Challenges, Competition, Complexity, Coordination and Community (the 5Cs), through which key collaborative governance conditions become observable in practice. While the regional EPN possesses many characteristics associated with effective collaborative governance, identified dysfunctionalities may hamper effective implementation. We discuss possible reforms that could enhance the efficacy of export promotion policy implementation. This study contributes to International Business Policy research by demonstrating how collaborative governance, originating in public policy and administration, can diagnose strengths, weaknesses and reform opportunities in fragmented EPNs. Our approach may also inform research design on the implementation of cross-frontier policies in different regional and national contexts.

JEL: F13, F18, F63

Keywords: Policy implementation, Collaborative governance framework, Export promotion policy, Export promotion service providers, Export promotion network

1. Introduction

International Business (IB) scholarship is called to develop a more focused and practice-oriented approach to the development of policy (Calma & Suder, 2020, Lundan, 2018, van Assche, 2018, 2022). These calls typically converge on two imperatives: the need for more practically relevant policy advice to international firms/organisations involved in cross-frontier transactions (Buckley, 2018, Sauvant, 2021, van Assche & De Marchi, 2024), and the advancement of policy frameworks adept at navigating global business environments (Altman, et al., 2024, van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018). Recent IB research has generated policy recommendations across economic, social, sustainability and technological domains (Luo & Tung, 2025, Montiel, et al., 2021, Rašković, 2024). However, this work has concentrated on firm-level policy formulation and the scope and depth of public policy interventions, with less attention to how policies are implemented through the organisations responsible for translating policy objectives into practice (van Assche & De Marchi, 2024). We address this gap by examining the implementation of export promotion policy¹. Specifically, our overarching research question is: how do the governance characteristics of export promotion networks—particularly their composition, coordination, legitimacy and accountability—shape the effective implementation of export promotion policy?

Export promotion is an important component of IB policy and a critical mechanism for enhancing national growth, promoting regional development, and stimulating firm-level competitiveness via internationalisation (Freixanet, 2022, Kahiya, 2024, Reed, 2024). Many countries incorporate export growth targets² into development strategies and deliver export promotion through independent export promotion service providers (EPSPs) that form EPNs. These EPSPs sit across the public, private and civil spheres³ (see Figure 2, Kahiya, 2024). Some are commercial organisations providing fee-based services (e.g., banks and law firms), while others include government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), chambers of commerce, industry associations and business associations. The increasingly turbulent and dynamic nature of the global business environments presents significant challenges not only for developing exports but also for sustaining performance. Meeting these challenges requires not only good policy design, appropriate interventions, but also their effective implementation. Yet, existing research has largely focused on export promotion policy design and outcomes (Freixanet, 2022, Olarreaga, 2024), giving little attention to policy implementation from a network perspective.

¹ Export promotion is also termed as export assistance or export support. For consistency, we use the term export promotion throughout the paper.

² For example, the UK's [Export Strategy](#) published in 2021 aims to grow exports to £1 trillion by 2030. Similarly, India's [Foreign Trade Policy 2023](#) sets a national target of US\$2 trillion by 2030.

³ Appendix A provides information about UK as an illustrative case, but this complex export support landscape is mirrored in other countries, e.g., China, India, Canada, Germany, and the Nordic countries.

This omission is important because export promotion policy is typically delivered through EPN whose effectiveness depends not only on the quality of individual providers but also on how they are governed. Studies reveal that the effectiveness of individual EPSPs varies (for a review, see Kahiya, 2024), while most export promotion programmes have positive effects, there are large variations in their outcomes (for a review, see Olarreaga, 2024). These variations may be related to the wide range of heterogeneous, independent EPSPs in EPN. Their proliferation frequently engenders significant structural pathologies, including problems of fragmentation, duplication of services, overlapping mandates, blurred responsibilities, and inconsistent messaging (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001), and lead to the supply of a substantial quantity of, sometimes mixed, information. These make it difficult for firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to identify suitable sources of support and utilise available services. Inadequate data on the quality and appropriateness of provision from the assortment of EPSPs adds to the challenge.

Furthermore, effective policy delivery requires more than competent and capable providers (composition) and the effective coordination among them (coordination) but also depends on the EPN governance to be legitimate (widely recognised and accepted by relevant parties) and accountable (responsible and answerable to key policy stakeholders). Consequently, the relatively limited mixed evidence on positive outcomes from export promotion policy may reflect not only differences in firm characteristics (e.g., size, stage of internationalisation, and capabilities), export barriers, and policy design, but also deficiencies in policy implementation. Such deficiencies can arise as internal inefficiencies within EPNs, associated with network composition and coordination, or external inefficiencies that reduce firm's ability to access and utilise support.⁴ These challenges highlight the importance of network governance (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001, Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Issues of governance composed of heterogeneous and independent agencies collaborating to achieve a common societal goal without clear hierarchical control and coordination are explicitly examined in the collaborative governance approach that is set in the public policy and administration domain (Ansell & Gash, 2008, Emerson, et al., 2012, Imperial, et al., 2016). The collaborative governance framework (CGF) (Ansell & Gash, 2008, Emerson, et al., 2012, Imperial, et al., 2016) analyses the conditions where multiple agencies can effectively interact and share responsibility legitimately and with good accountability in securing of public policy objectives. We therefore use CGF to examine export promotion policy implementation through an EPN.

⁴ We thank a reviewer for the clear articulation of two terms: internal inefficiencies within the EPN and external inefficiencies experienced by the firms.

To ground this inquiry, we conduct an in-depth case study of the EPN in West Yorkshire in the UK which has no identifiable hierarchical system of control and coordination and instead depends on voluntary collaboration among EPSPs. Applying the CGF, we examine whether the conditions for effective collaboration exist, identify dysfunctionalities and areas of strength, and consider reforms that may improve policy delivery. Our focus is on policy implementation rather than policy stance, design, or outcomes. The case-specific research questions are as follows:

- (1) What is the composition of the EPN and to what extent does it exhibit the governance condition of coordination, legitimacy and accountability?
- (2) What are major dysfunctionalities and areas of strength that characterise export promotion policy delivery within the EPN?
- (3) What governance reforms could improve the effectiveness of export promotion policy implementation?

The study employs a three-stage, multi-method methodology. First, we conducted a qualitative network analysis (Jaspersen & Stein, 2019) to map the landscape of major EPSPs in West Yorkshire and to understand the extent of their roles and connections. Second, semi-structured interviews with representatives from these EPSPs provided qualitative insights into how export support is provided by and coordinated between these EPSPs. Third, we organised an in-person workshop to present our initial findings to stakeholders which formed the basis of focus group discussions on improving collaborative governance of the EPN. Our findings are structured around five interrelated themes, which we term the “5Cs”: Challenges, Competition, Complexity, Coordination and Community. The 5Cs provide a theory-informed organising heuristic rather than a new theoretical framework. Anchored in the CGF, they represent empirical manifestations through which the key dimensions of CGF become observable in fragmented EPN. In other words, the 5Cs operationalise the CGF, providing an analytical structure for patterns observed in the West Yorkshire EPN.

The paper makes three contributions. First, the study advances IB policy research by conceptualising policy implementation as a governance issue that extends beyond the design and effectiveness of individual policy interventions (van Assche & De Marchi, 2024). By examining the EPN as the unit of analysis, we show how the composition and governance of the wider delivery network shape export promotion policy implementation, an issue that has received limited attention in IB policy and export promotion research (Freixanet, 2022, Olarreaga, 2024). Second, our study responds to Buckley’s (2018) call for greater attention to the meso-level perspective on IB policy. We examine how export promotion policy is enacted when policy stance and major interventions are formulated primarily at the macro-level through national decision-making, while delivery takes place at the meso level through regional implementation and voluntary collaboration among a range of EPSPs. This extends understanding of the governance arrangements and inter-organisational relationships through which policy is translated

into practice. Third, the study provides practical insights into the governance of export promotion policy by identifying strengths and dysfunctionalities associated with system context, network design, leadership, collaborative dynamics and collaborative action. It further identifies possible governance reforms relevant to policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve policy delivery through similarly fragmented multi-actor networks in other UK regions and in other countries.

2. Governance of International Business Policy

A confluence of profound transformations across political, economic, social, and technological milieu has intensified calls for IB scholarship to generate more policy-relevant insights (Calma & Suder, 2020, Lundan, 2018, van Assche, 2018). The research agenda encompasses a broad spectrum of concerns from geopolitical determinants of international trade and investment (Ghauri, et al., 2024) to the sustainability and societal imperative of our era, e.g., equity and fairness (Doh, et al., 2023, van Tulder & van Mil, 2022). Considerable effort has been devoted to examining the strategic and operational implications of societal and technological factors, such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), digitalisation, and modern slavery, and to identifying policies to address impediments to securing desirable outcomes (e.g., Autio, et al., 2021, Montiel, et al., 2021, Rašković, 2024, van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018). While effort has been directed towards understanding policy design, interventions and outcomes, a pivotal yet underdeveloped issue concerns policy implementation. Yet, public policy objectives are ultimately achieved through implementation processes that translate policy goals into actions by the firms and other organisations (van Assche & De Marchi, 2024).

Many public policy objectives relate to cross-frontier transactions require support to be delivered through multiple organisations providing information, guidance, finance, training and other forms of assistance. They help firms develop and sustain resources, capabilities, routines, and practices compatible with policy objectives. Yet, effective policy implementation depends not only on the quality of individual providers, but also on the system of delivery that enables firms with diverse requirements and capabilities to secure appropriate help from a coherent, and easy to use (at low-cost) network of providers. This places network governance at the centre of successful policy delivery.

One response to these challenges is hierarchical governance. In principle, a hierarchical governing body can oversee service provision, clarify responsibilities, improve coherence, and align provider activities with policy objectives (Hillo, et al., 2024). However, a hierarchical solution may be difficult to create and operate if institutional conditions encourage (or require or are unable to prevent) a multiplicity of independent providers (Bianchi, et al., 2021, Doberstein, 2016). Hierarchical bodies may also suffer from x-inefficiency due to a lack of competition that renders them uneconomical (Leibenstein, 1987). Achieving legitimacy, accountability, and agility through hierarchical governance is therefore often

challenging (Cristofoli, et al., 2022, Zhou & Dai, 2023). Under these conditions, a collaborative governance approach may be more appropriate than hierarchical bodies.

2.1 The Collaborative Governance Approach

Collaborative governance, or governance through collaboration, refers to voluntary coordination of independent agencies that share common objectives but possess different roles, resources, and expertise (Ansell & Gash, 2008, das Mercês Milagres, et al., 2019, Doberstein, 2016, Hillo, et al., 2024). Originating in public policy and administration and building on earlier work on voluntary collaboration (Ostrom, 1990), it has been applied to complex issues that cannot be effectively resolved by a single agent (Bingham & O'Leary, 2014, O'Flynn & Wana, 2008), including environmental sustainability in the operations of organisations (Avoyan, 2023, McNaught, 2024, Ulibarri, et al., 2023), addressing societal problems in corporate governance and social responsibility programmes (Bendell, et al., 2011, Zadek, 2008), labour issues in global supply chains (Lee, et al., 2020) and health care matters (Belrhiti, et al., 2024, Kaiser, et al., 2025). It provides a useful perspective for analysing policy implementation through networks of independent agencies where hierarchical control and coordination are absent or limited and the independent agencies voluntarily collaborate to achieve more desirable outcomes.

Situated within the wider theoretical tradition of network governance (Provan & Kenis, 2008, Wang & Ran, 2023) and institutional collective action (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001, Ostrom, 1990), the CGF refers to a “governing arrangement where public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative” (Ansell & Gash, 2008: 544). It includes “the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished” (Emerson, et al., 2012: 2). Central to the CGF are three characteristics: shared goals, multiple independent agencies, and interdependent actions.

The framework specifies four core elements – starting conditions, institutional design, facilitative leadership and collaborative process – that enable effective collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Starting conditions include power/resource imbalances requiring resolution and incentive to work together, creating the need for actors to enter the collaboration. Institutional design structures interactions among participants. Facilitative leadership is essential to initiate and sustain collaboration. Together, these factors influence collaborative process underpinned by dialogue, trust-building, commitment, shared understanding, and acceptable means to resolve disputes. Applied to EPNs, the CGF enables us to move beyond identifying fragmentation or coordination problems descriptively. It directs attention to the governance conditions of composition, coordination, legitimacy and

accountability underlying those problems. The framework is particularly relevant for IB policy implementation. Unlike the control and coordination mechanisms that multinational enterprises (MNEs) employ in organising subsidiaries, joint ventures, and market-based contractual relationships, collaborative governance is predicated on independence of participants that are neither owned nor contractually controlled by a hierarchical body. Instead, they voluntarily collaborate to achieve outcomes superior to those attainable through uncoordinated actions. While IB research devotes extensive attention and has developed a sophisticated understanding on effective control and coordination within MNEs, there is limited research on effective coordination of diverse agencies (without hierarchical control) in implementing public policies involving cross-frontier transactions. Consequently, policy recommendations often overlook these governance challenges.

< Figure 1 Here >

Figure 1 illustrates the public policy process. Most IB policy research concentrates on policy formation, especially on policy recommendations to better achieve policy objectives. However, effective implementation is indispensable for securing intended outcomes. The dotted arrow in Figure 1 illustrates the issues that are often overlooked in IB research. The principal thrust of our study is on the coordination of the network in the context characterised by a multiplicity of independent agencies operating without the discipline of a hierarchical body. We anchor EPN within established theoretical traditions on inter-organisational collaboration and governance, such as network governance and institutional collective action (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001, Provan & Kenis, 2008). Drawing on the CGF (Ansell & Gash, 2008, Emerson, et al., 2012, Imperial, et al., 2016), we explore the structural and operational context of the governance of export promotion policy implementation. This provides insights on the provision of practical support to firms in an important area of IB policy.

2.2 Export Promotion Policy Implementation

Export promotion policy implementation manifests through complex mechanisms based on the provision of support to firms and other organisations (potentially) involved in exporting (Freixanet, 2022). This occurs within a dynamic IB environment characterised by shifting trade regimes, geopolitical volatility, changes in competitive environments, evolving consumer preferences, and rapid technological developments. To assist (potential) exporters in navigating these challenges, there are a variety of EPSPs that supply export promotion services and deliver export promotion programmes (Kahiya, 2024). In countries, such as the UK, which lack hierarchical control bodies for export promotion policy, support is delivered by a heterogenous set of organisations including national and regional government agencies, chambers of commerce, industry/business associations, and profit-seeking firms. This multiplicity of providers stems from institutional factors emerging from a legacy of

historical and socio-economic path dependencies. Meanwhile, issues of x-inefficiency due to a lack of competition among providers, the possibility of exclusion of important stakeholders, and other accountability deficits have historically deterred the creation of powerful hierarchical control and coordination.

These EPSPs furnish support to organisations that mitigate international transaction costs connected to marketing adaptation, compliance to regulatory requirements, logistic arrangements, and export documentation (Kahiya, 2024). They also serve to address information asymmetries by disseminating general and market-specific information derived from experience and experimentation. Some EPSPs provide support on financial requirements and others focus on education and training to develop routines and practices conducive for exporting (Kahiya, 2018, Lederman, et al., 2010). A substantial body of research has sought to evaluate the effectiveness of individual EPSPs, specific export promotion programmes, and the impact of support on firm-level outcomes such as market entry, export intensity, export capabilities, and competitiveness (e.g., Ayob & Freixanet, 2014, Broocks & Van Biesebroeck, 2017, Cadot, et al., 2015, Catanzaro & Teyssier, 2021, Francis & Collins-Dodd, 2004, Freixanet, 2012, Leonidou, et al., 2007, Malca, et al., 2020, Tinitis & Fey, 2022, van Biesebroeck, et al., 2015, Volpe Martincus & Carballo, 2010). While the efficacy of these interventions varies considerably (for a review, see Kahiya, 2024), the literature broadly affirms a positive, albeit highly heterogenous in magnitude, effect, with outcomes contingent on programme type, timing and firm characteristics (e.g., size, stage of internationalisation, capabilities) (for a review, see Olarreaga, 2024). However, little attention has been paid to whether variation in outcomes may reflect differences in policy implementation. Effective implementation depends not only on the capabilities of individual EPSPs, but also on how they interact and coordinate their activities within the wider EPN. Where coordination is weak, firms may face service duplication, confusion regarding the appropriate locus of support, difficulties to access EPSPs at low cost, and information overload. These dysfunctionalities may result in firms failing to find suitable help or even abandoning (or never initiating) the search for help. Understanding how EPNs are governed is therefore central to policy implementation.

The CGF provides a useful analytical lens. Although EPSPs have a shared goal of supporting exporting, they differ in their mandates, incentives, resources, and stakeholder relationships. Government agencies at the national and regional level are animated by economic and political interests, pursuing national trade targets (e.g., export growth, promoting productivity, adjusting to changing global environments) and promoting certain sectors or regions (Kotabe & Czinkota, 1992, Lederman, et al., 2010). They often provide subsidised or free services. Private-sector organisations, on the other hand, provide fee-based support (or require membership) for services beyond the provision of generic information and advice on exporting. Intermediary organisations, e.g., chambers of commerce and trade associations usually have dual interests: to serve their members (e.g., supporting their activities, promoting their interests,

and engaging in policy lobbying on behalf of the members) and to protect their organisational legitimacy and funding streams (Bennett, 1998, Cezar, 2024). Private consultants and advisors (such as banks, law firms and management consultancy firms) providing fee-based export support (often at high cost) are also important EPSPs. The divergent interests and institutional logics create a structural context in which collaboration is both necessary and challenging. This tension underscores the critical role of effective governance that can mediate conflicting interests, foster trust, and maintain alignment among EPSPs by creating and sustain meaningful collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008, Avoyan, 2023). From a collaborative governance perspective, policy implementation depends on how EPSPs negotiate responsibilities, coordinate priorities, and develop relationships and institutional arrangements needed to pursue shared goals.

To examine these issues, we study the EPN in a UK region (West Yorkshire), focusing on the EPSPs for whom the provision of export support is a primary organisational function, rather than a subsidiary commercial activity or an ancillary component of another policy domain. Applying the CGF, we assess the extent to which the key elements are present, identify major governance obstacles and areas of strengths, and propose reforms that may improve policy implementation. Our study thus goes beyond earlier contributions by centring EPN as the unit of analysis and shifting attention from evaluating individual agency/programme effectiveness and firm-level outcomes to governance conditions that shape policy implementation within a fragmented multi-actor system.

3. Methodology

The UK export promotion landscape is characterised by a complex and diverse array of organisations operating at both the national and regional levels (Appendix A). This study focuses on West Yorkshire, a metropolitan county in England (Appendix B). A case study design is particularly suited to examine governance dynamics within a complex, multi-actor institutional setting, where boundaries between organisations, policies, and practices are blurred. West Yorkshire represents an analytically relevant case because it exhibits characteristics commonly associated with contemporary EPNs including the high degree of institutional fragmentation, the co-existence of public, private, and membership EPSPs, and the absence of a lead coordinating authority. These features are precisely the conditions under which collaborative governance becomes particularly important, making West Yorkshire a suitable setting for examining the governance conditions that shape effective policy implementation. Following established case study principles, our design leverages multiple sources of evidence to enable triangulation and develop a rich contextual understanding of EPN governance (Eisenhardt, 1989, Yin, 2018, 2011).

3.1 Data Collection

We adopted a theory-guided qualitative research design using a sequential multi-method approach comprising three phases: (1) organisational mapping through desk research, (2) semi-structured interviews with EPSP representatives, and (3) focus group discussions through an in-person stakeholder workshop involving businesses, academics, and EPSP representatives. Our approach enabled a macro-level understanding of institutional architecture and a micro-level exploration of stakeholder experiences and perceptions. By integrating multiple qualitative methods, we captured the structural and experiential dimensions of the regional export promotion landscape, while triangulating data to enhance research credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Phase 1: Qualitative Network Mapping

Phase 1 (10/2023-1/2024) involved a qualitative network analysis to construct a relational map, setting the case boundary and identifying major EPSPs. The boundary of the EPN was defined geographically in relation to the implementation of export promotion policy within West Yorkshire, rather than by the location of an organisation's headquarters. National organisations were included where evidence demonstrated a substantive role in providing, coordinating or facilitating export support within the region. This included those operating through regional offices, local delivery arrangements, partnerships or referral relationships. The resulting network is not intended to represent an exhaustive census of all organisations, rather it captures those demonstrably embedded within the EPN.

We adopted an iterative, snowballing approach to the qualitative network mapping (Jaspersen & Stein, 2019). The resulting map identified major EPSPs and their relationships, establishing rapport in subsequent interviews. As the initial entry points, we selected Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA), commonly referred to as “seeds” because they are the primary public-sector actors responsible for trade, investment, export support, and regional economic development in West Yorkshire. We identified their direct connections, such as partners, collaborators, and delivery contractors, and these connections were subsequently explored. Through successive rounds of mapping and verification, the network expanded organically.

This mapping process was primarily undertaken by two of the six-member research team through systematic analysis of policy documents, organisational websites, and public reports. The emerging network map was regularly discussed collaboratively with the wider team and members of WYCA whose insights helped refine and validate the emerging structure. Through several rounds of iteration, we identified 51 organisations with a discernible role in the regional EPN (see Appendix Table A1 for the full list). Notably, they do not include nationally active organisations, e.g., the China-Britain Business Council and UK India Business Council, without a clearly evidenced connection to the regional network, and highly specialist providers for which export support is peripheral to their core

business (e.g., banks, law firms, and management consultancy firms), were not included in the core EPN. To ensure a focused analysis, we identified 15 major EPSPs whose involvement in export promotion constituted substantive volume of activities in West Yorkshire (Figure 2). We reached out to potential contacts for Phase 2. These contacts were selected to represent a broad range of roles.

< Figure 2 Here >

Phase 2: Semi-structured Interviews

During Phase 2 (2/2024-5/2024), three of the six-member research team conducted semi-structured interviews to generate in-depth insights into how actors experienced, interpreted, and navigated the EPN governance arrangements. The qualitative nature of our research is instrumental in unravelling the complexities of existing and evolving export promotion activities, aligning with our objective of understanding complex issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Using purposive sampling, we conducted 15 interviews with 16 respondents: 14 online interviews involving 15 respondents with interviewees/respondents (R) 14 and 15 participating jointly as representatives of the same organisation. We also conducted a confirmatory interview in July 2024 after the stakeholder workshop (Phase 3). Table 1 summarises the interviewees. The network map (Figure 2) served as an elicitation device during interviews. We encouraged interviewees to comment on the map, identify potentially omitted key actors, and reflect on inter-organisational relationships. This approach is well suited to examine relational embeddedness and network dynamics (Jaspersen & Stein, 2019). Interviews lasted approximately one hour were recorded and transcribed, and where necessary, were supplemented by follow-up emails.

< Table 1 Here >

Phase 3: Stakeholder Workshop with Focus Groups

Phase 3 consisted of an in-person stakeholder workshop in June 2024. As part of the study's within-case triangulation strategy (Yin, 2018), it pursued a dual objective: to validate preliminary findings derived from interview analysis and to elicit substantive discussion on actionable strategies to improve the operation of the region's EPN. The workshop involved 22 participants drawn from policymakers, practitioners, academics and businesspeople with experience in export activities in West Yorkshire. This curated composition ensured a comprehensive data collection process (Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2009). Over 60% of the cohort were interviewees, a deliberate measure to ensure continuity between the interview findings and workshop discussions (Cameron, 2005). Participants were divided into two focus groups, each facilitated by two of the six-member research team. Comprehensive notes were taken and subsequently analysed to identify convergences and divergences with the interview data. This process

helped strengthen the trustworthiness of our interpretation and provided additional contextual insights into the interview themes (Stake, 1995). Given the involvement of representatives from WYCA in the stakeholder workshop and in validating preliminary findings, particular attention was devoted to issues of reflexivity and potential bias. WYCA's role was limited to commenting on the practical relevance and factual accuracy of emerging findings. It did not extend to the coding process, analytical categories, or data interpretation. These safeguards helped maintain the analytical independence of the research.

3.2 Data Analysis

Our qualitative network analysis follows a network map interview approach, as defined by Jaspersen and Stein (2019), combined with iterative snowball sampling. Following initial identification of actors via documentary analysis (Phase 1), interviewees were asked (Phase 2) about relevant EPSPs and their relationships, roles, and perceived influence within the EPN. The map was used not as a standalone analytical output but an elicitation tool during interviews and stakeholder workshop, encouraging reflection, comparison, and sensemaking about inter-organisational relationships.

To enhance transparency, interaction patterns, influence, and coordination roles were identified through systematic analysis of interview and workshop material, supported by repeated references across respondents. The map functioned as a boundary object that structured discussions, enabled comparison across interviews, and helped identify convergent and divergent perceptions of the EPN. These insights were subsequently triangulated with documentary evidence to validate organisational roles, relationships and mandates. Evidence derived from network mapping discussions, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis was iteratively compared to assess consistency. Divergent perceptions were not treated as methodological noise but analysed as substantive indicators of governance ambiguity, contested influence, or competitive dynamics.

The interview and workshop data were analysed in two stages. First five of the six-member research team conducted an inductive analysis of interview transcripts, workshop notes and recordings to identify recurring practices, tensions, relationships and perceptions. Contiguous passages were assigned first-order codes that captured substantive meanings (see Figure 3). The CGF was not used as a predetermined coding structure during this stage. Second, related first-order codes were consolidated into higher-order categories through iterative dialogue between the data and the collaborative governance literature. The CGF was introduced as a sensitising and interpretive lens, informing the interpretation of emerging themes rather than the initial coding structure (van Hulst & Visser, 2025). Throughout the analysis, the authors compared interpretations, revisited coding decisions and repeatedly returned to the data to refine thematic boundaries and verify thematic coherence, thereby

enhancing analytical clarity and internal consistency (Faircloth, 2012, Miles & Huberman, 1994). Figure 3 presents data structure generated from our analysis.

< Figure 3 Here >

To enhance the quality and rigour of the study, we explicitly addressed key criteria for qualitative research. Analytical independence was maintained through team-based coding by multiple authors, triangulation across documents, interviews, and workshop data, and the inclusion of perspectives from a diverse set of EPSPs. These measures helped mitigate the risk of undue influence and ensured that the analysis reflected an empirically grounded account of governance dynamics within the EPN. In line with Guba and Lincoln (1989), credibility was ensured through triangulation across multiple sources of evidence. Dependability was supported by a transparent and systematic research process, including clearly documented case boundary, interview protocols, and an explicit account of the analytical steps from first-order coding to higher-order category development and interpretation. Confirmability was enhanced through team-based coding and interpretation, with five authors jointly reviewing transcripts, workshop notes, and emerging themes, and through reflexive discussions that interrogated alternative readings of the data. Transferability was addressed through description of the institutional and policy context of export promotion in West Yorkshire, allowing readers to assess analytical relevance of the findings to other regional export promotion systems with comparable governance characteristics. In line with Tracy's (2010) criteria for qualitative quality, we ensured authenticity and integrity through sustained engagement with policymakers and practitioners across multiple phases of the research, resonance through empirically grounded accounts that reflected the lived experiences of interviewees/participants, and pragmatic usefulness by generating policy-relevant insights aimed at informing EPNs in practice.

4. Findings

Phase 1 identified 51 EPSPs across West Yorkshire (Appendix Table A1). They provide a wide range of services from finance and grants, finding and developing export markets, participating in trade missions/fairs, making business plan for exporting, export management training, and supplying detailed export-related intelligence by industry, country and legal requirements (e.g., activities to promote exports to fast growing Asian markets). A significant proportion of the information, support and training available to firms in West Yorkshire originates from national organisations (Appendix A). They operated through regional offices, local delivery arrangements, partnerships or referral relationships that gave them an identifiable role in the regional EPN.

Of these 51 EPSPs, we identify 15 major organisations that engage substantively in export promotion services. This cohort includes government agencies, local authorities, business support organisations, trade associations, and private-sector intermediaries. For analytical purposes, they can be classified into three major categories: central hubs (actors that connect multiple EPSPs), business advocacy clusters (actors that represent firms and articulate business needs) and supporting and specialist actors (actors provide specialised resources, services, or knowledge). Appendix B presents information on the EPN and the categorisation of the 15 EPSPs. It reveals the EPN with fragmented authority, unclear mandates and power/resource imbalances, creating the structural need for collaborative governance in the first place. Taking together, the qualitative network mapping highlights a notable degree of integration between local and national organisations that jointly promote exports in West Yorkshire.

The empirical data from interviews and the stakeholder workshop provide insights into the institutional and operational realities of the EPN. Table 2 presents illustrative quotations from the interviews. The findings are organised around five interrelated themes (5Cs): Challenges, Competition, Complexity, Coordination and Community. The 5Cs constitute empirically grounded manifestations through which the key dimensions of CGF become observable. Challenges bring together evidence concerning the barriers faced by (potential) exporters and the types of support required to address them. Competition captures the tensions between EPSPs arising from overlapping provision, funding arrangements, performance targets and contested relationships with clients. Complexity captures the fragmented structure of the EPN, including overlapping mandates, unclear organisational roles, multiple points of access, uncertainty over decision-making authority and the resulting difficulty of navigating the EPN. Coordination encompasses referrals, joint provision, information exchange, leadership and efforts to align services. Community captures the role of trust, shared purpose, informal relationships and a sense of regional belonging in supporting collaboration.

4.1 Challenges to (Potential) Exporters

Export barriers and the need for accessible and appropriate support provides the basis for the shared problem context within which the EPN operates. Collectively, EPSPs help firms seize opportunities and overcome impediments to exporting. Interviewees widely recognise the strategic and economic benefits of exporting. R9 noted exporting is seen not only as a means of enhancing productivity, but also a pathway to growth and wealth (*Quote 1*). However, this optimism is accompanied by a pragmatic awareness of challenges. Interviewees identified both external challenges, e.g., changing regulations and market access requirements, and internal constraints, e.g., knowledge gaps, capacity limit and low risk tolerance. A prevailing sentiment relayed by firms to EPSPs is that international expansion is increasingly costly and burdensome, leading to reluctance (R1). In today's risk-averse, post-Brexit environment, entering foreign markets is viewed as being expensive (R3) or simply more trouble than

it is worth – ‘*why would you bother?*’ (R12), ‘*It’s just not worth it*’ (R13, R14). While larger firms may have the capacity to navigate export processes, SMEs face disproportionate challenges, and require greater assistance (R8, R14). These challenges echo prior findings that export promotion effectiveness is often constrained by firms’ limited capacity, particularly among SMEs (Ayob & Freixanet, 2014, Catanzaro & Teyssier, 2021, Francis & Collins-Dodd, 2004, Malca, et al., 2020, Tinitis & Fey, 2022).

Brexit has exerted a profound impact on business (R3) as European countries are top destinations for West Yorkshire exporters. Many firms may not have fully realised that they were exporting or had become ‘accidental exporters’ by taking small, unexpected orders from Europe (R11). Servicing this market has, however, become markedly less straightforward. For example, the once-common practice of ‘*import, re-label, export*’ is no longer a simple option (R1) and sending goods from UK to EU by post has become more difficult (R13). Some SMEs have withdrawn from this market and have not attempted to expand into new, non-EU markets (R12). As a result, opportunities for incremental internationalisation have diminished. R13 noted some businesses struggle to move beyond initial barriers to exporting (*Quote 4*) and there is a need to shift the perception that exporting is unattainable, especially since most trade is likely to occur with EU, despite policy narratives promoting distant markets like US, India, and China (*Quote 5*).

Interviewees agreed that (potential) exporters need ‘international market intelligence’, defined as actionable information/knowledge about routes to market, distribution channels, and prices (R1). SMEs in particular need practical, tailored advice that addresses their unique circumstances (R14), rather than generic data or knowledge (R1; R3). They want easier access to inputs and guidance, e.g., a trade portal (R14, *Quote 2*; R16, *Quote 3*) that simply help them understand what is involved (R15) and whether it is worthwhile (R14). For example, the availability of funding is one of the most frequent enquiries (R1, R7, R10). However, the national UK government export promotion website was viewed by many firms as being over-complicated, with a maze of links to new pages and documents (R15). It is noteworthy that, at the time of writing (July 2026), WYCA⁵ and DBT⁶ established online trade portals intended to function as a “One-Stop-Shop”, improving access to export support and simplify navigation of the support landscape. While this development occurred after the period covered by our data and is consistent with stakeholder calls for an accessible and coherent entry point into the EPN, their effectiveness falls outside the scope of our analysis. Their introduction of the trade portals therefore should not be interpreted as evidence that the broader dysfunctionalities identified in this study, particularly those relating to information overload, referral, coordination and guidance towards appropriate sources of support, have been resolved.

⁵ <https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/growth-hub/trade-and-export/>

⁶ <https://www.business.gov.uk/export-from-uk/learn/categories/>

Interviewees acknowledged improvements during and after the COVID-19 period, especially with the launch of the Export Academy – viewed as ‘*not particularly deep support, but wide support, and easy to access*’ (R13). However, interviewees explained that SMEs not ‘on the system’ expressed that they still found it difficult to access help or be identified as needing help ‘*how do we support those who do just get their head down, but all of a sudden have a problem and then say, what do I do*’ (R13). Those firms were often left to fend for themselves (R1) but nevertheless have a strong appetite to export. As R12 stated, ‘*We’re knocking on open doors to get companies back into exporting.*’

These findings were corroborated during focus group discussions. Participants indicated that broader turbulence in the trade environment, including Brexit-related uncertainty and changes to trading arrangements, alongside rapid technological developments, made it difficult to assess export opportunities and risks. A consensus emerged that EPSPs are needed to address the system-level challenges and the major EPSPs are viewed as reputable and appropriate providers of export support in West Yorkshire. However, the EPN can seem like a ‘dysfunctional family’: EPSPs know each other and recognise the need to work together, but do not get together enough to share information meaningfully. Information overload is a significant barrier, particularly for SMEs. This overload arises not only from the large number of EPSPs, but also from the wide range of information sources and advice available, spanning basic guidance to highly specialised support. Confusion was especially acute for firms seeking individualised consultancy-type assistance, such as help with business planning or training to access finance. Several firms reported that they did not know what kind of support they needed, or even whether exporting was appropriate for them. Additionally, there was the difficulty of obtaining accessible, coherent and low-cost information and advice. Stakeholders widely supported the idea of a “One-Stop-Shop” online system to guide firms through available resources and provide clear referral pathways. However, there was little agreement on how such a system should be developed, governed, or sustained, particularly given the overlapping roles and competing interests of different EPSPs.

4.2 Competition within the EPN

The tensions between EPSPs manifest in several ways: between membership organisations, between public- and private-sector providers, and among organisations offering support through external consultants. Competition can also be driven by public funded programmes. Where organisations offer similar services, this leads to certain levels of ‘protectionism’ (R3, R4, R6). Such rivalry can weaken incentives to work together by encouraging siloed operations, duplication and protection of funding, visibility and client relationships.

Tensions between EPSPs

Membership organisations compete for members with like organisations, and any crossover of services creates tensions (R5). Ordinarily they are not willing to share their business insight with competitors (R3), and some services will be exclusive to members. Competition exists between chambers, but usually there is a gentleman's agreement on territories for proactive marketing, and some service sector firms prefer to be members of multiple providers. Public- and private-sector providers have different mandates and business models. Competition can arise from the public sector replicating what the private sector has developed or is already doing (e.g. boot camps); or is best placed to do (e.g. Export Academy vs IOE&IT); or where services are offered for free in competition with offerings in the private sector. Organisations that do not have export support as a core service may also offer international trade advice via consultancy (e.g. customs advice). Sometimes, consultants engaged initially to offer such services subsequently work directly with the clients. This behaviour can create confusion and can serve as a driver for organisations to take more services in-house (R2).

Services offered for free by programmes can also cause tensions with membership and private-sector organisations that may already offer such services on a commercial basis. One private-sector interviewee stated *'They ring us up and say would you mind introducing us to your customers to sell our services which we have funding for from West Yorkshire Combined Authority for free, which would mean I couldn't sell them for a profit. Just bizarre... Why an earth am I going to promote a service of someone selling training for nothing, that I [already] do?... They're trying to give away services that we sell!'* Furthermore, targets, KPIs and other deliverables, often from funded programmes, can influence the sense of competition (R7, *Quote 6*). At the end of a programme, businesses that deliver support on a paid-for basis can be left weaker (R14, *Quote 7*; R13), leaving the network with less support than before. It can be argued that existing support in the EPN needs to be strengthened, and not undermined, and that 'free support' is not always the answer (R13, *Quote 8*).

Protectionism within the EPN

Some actors could be viewed as having a silo mentality, which leads to protectionism (R4). The network would benefit from being more joined up (R4, R5). While there is a high volume of activity across the region, there is little common understanding about its impact (R5). According to interviewees there are several factors that typically inhibit referrals and sharing across the network, including target culture, quality control, commercial models and personal relationship. EPSPs appear reluctant to share customers, even if customer requirements do not suit their skill sets (R1). There is tendency of both public- and private-sector organisations *'to think we can do it all'* (R9). Targets (e.g., programme outcomes, revenue) drive certain kinds of behaviour, e.g., prioritising meeting targets over strategic

alignment by working with any business rather than the most appropriate ones (R13, *Quote 9*). This can end up being counterproductive, hindering referrals to other organisations in the network (R1, R7, R13). There is therefore a need for independent advisors, maybe free of targets and working in the interest of the clients only (R1).

Perceptions about quality control may further hinder referrals (R12). Anyone can set up as a trade consultant with no accreditation or quality control (R2). Even life coaches are now claiming expertise in the trade domain (R1). Private organisations offering advice commercially are sometimes critical of the quality of support offered by fixed term, publicly supported ‘programmes’ (R13). Too many players make it hard for both businesses (R2) and EPSPs. Protectionism also results from different commercial modes of EPSPs which restrict referrals and information sharing. Membership EPSPs may have difficult relationships with public-sector organisations (R9). Public-sector EPSPs share information between each other more readily than with (or between) private organisations. For example, connectivity for UKEF might be stronger with DBT and WYCA than with the chambers. As a result, UKEF often send courtesy emails to DBT about client contacts. The role of relationships is also important; both R2 and R6 noted *‘it comes down to the relationship’*. For example, the Chamber International – DBT relationship appears to benefit from having former DBT advisors working on their team.

Competition constituted a recurring theme throughout the workshop deliberations. Stakeholders highlighted the difficulty of determining when competition among EPSPs generates better support and when it undermines coherence and confuses firms. Disagreements were especially pronounced in areas requiring tailored services. There was broad recognition that a stable, long-term approach to determining which firms should receive free or subsidised support, and for how long, is crucial to reducing uncertainty around the cost of services. However, it was not clear how divergent interests among the EPSPs could be resolved, nor where leadership would emerge to steer the EPN towards acceptable and workable solutions.

4.3 Complexity of the EPN

Interviewees highlight that the EPN is overly complex and fragmented, making it difficult to navigate. While firms appreciate the assistance available, interviewees noted the proliferation of organisations (R2) and entry points (R6) caused confusion for businesses (R1, R2, R4). Across the board, interviewees called for a more streamlined and collaborative approach to export support.

The landscape and functionality of the EPN

During interviews, we used the network map (Figure 2) in which their own organisations were featured as a discussion prompt. Interviewees described the visualised EPN as confusing (R3, R11), complicated (R5, R6, R10, R14), unclear (R9), not easy to access or identify the whereabouts of advice (R13), and duplication of offerings (R7). As a result, firms, faced with information overload, felt baffled (R10), bewildered (R7), or easily overwhelmed (R6, R15). Firms setting out for the first time to export may be put off (see *Quote 10* from R3; R14). They did not always know who to turn to (see *Quote 11* from R12; R4), how to navigate the available support (R6), or how to find the ‘right’ support (see *Quote 12* from R7). In addition, EPSPs may have different perspectives on international trade (R14).

While the EPN offers a wide range of support, interviews and workshop participants consistently viewed that the multiplicity of providers as problematic. Firms seeking help are confused when confronted with complementary and sometimes competing export support services. This challenge is compounded by unclear role differentiation among EPSPs, with some providers themselves lack clarity about their positioning within the EPN (R5).

The complexity of the EPN and means of providing help (sometimes involving cooperation and sometimes competition between EPSPs), and in some cases a lack of knowledge about the specifics of the services offered by other EPSPs, often meant it was often unclear what help was available, and which organisations were best placed to provide appropriate help. This was thought to particularly affect SMEs, especially those with little or no exporting experience. Resource-constrained and often lacking the tacit knowledge necessary to identify what they need to know; such firms are ill-equipped to navigate the extensive informational terrain and frequently cannot articulate the precise nature of the guidance required to initiate or develop their exporting activities. As this group of firms are most likely to be crucial to boost exporting from regions like West Yorkshire, these problems of access and cost present a serious obstacle to effective policy to promote exports. Accordingly, there was a widespread call for a single access point – a streamlined interface – that simplifies their engagement with the EPN (R3, R4, R5, R14, R15).

Non-consensuable focal points (leadership)

Drawing from the network map, interviewees offered perspectives on which EPSPs should occupy the focal point or leadership of the network. For some, the prominence of an EPSP on the map is closely tied to its embeddedness within the regional business community. Organisations with a strong regional presence and influence were seen as deserving of central placement. DBT, a central government organisation, perceived itself as having most connections and occupying a pivotal role within the network, as its director explained *‘I would probably swap ourselves with the combined authority, because I think we kind of see ourselves as a major broker.... I think we feel and think of ourselves as*

being at the centre of the circles and not sitting out on the edge'. However, this self-perception was not universally shared. Others challenged DBT's centrality, suggesting that it functions more as an outlier, and that its limited regional embeddedness attenuates its practical influence within the network (R14). These contrasting views highlight a broader issue of contested influence within the governance structure. Some interviewees also suggested that organisations such as Chamber International and IOE&IT may occupy dominant positions, since they are the 'deliverers' of practical services. In contrast, some organisations (e.g., WYCA), despite their numerous connections within the EPN, may be perceived as 'sign-posters', offering initial, light touch advice before directing businesses to specialised EPSPs such as the chambers or DBT (R3). Additionally, programme delivery contractors were viewed as less integral, relative to organisations whose strong regional depth lent them greater perceived legitimacy (R12, *Quote 13*). Overall, the lack of consensus over which organisations should serve as focal points engenders governance ambiguity, potentially leading to a diffusion of responsibility and impending coordinated action and coherent messaging.

These divergent interpretations of focal point (leadership) underscore the inherent subjective nature of influence and value within the EPN. Despite this subjectivity, the interview analysis revealed a degree of convergence that 13 EPSPs were consistently identified as key actors. These include previously identified central hubs (e.g., DBT, WYCA), business advocacy clusters (e.g., Chamber International, IoD, YABA), and peripheral supporting and specialist actors (e.g., Exemplas, RTC North). This reflects the fact that perceived leadership within the EPN is shaped not only by formal mandates or policy authority, but also by informal interactions with firms, brokerage functions, and the ability to connect businesses to relevant export support services.

The complementary components: organisational and trade complement

While our primary focus centres upon EPSPs directly involved in the EPN, it is important to acknowledge the important role of complementary organisations, e.g., training firms, consultants, and *referral networks* of banks, financial services and law firms who may refer firms to further support in the network (R2, R3, R13). These organisations are not central to the EPN but perform an indispensable facilitative function. Some EPSPs do refer clients to them, though such referral practices often occur informally and inconsistently. As a result, businesses are left to navigate the EPN on their own, often unaware of where to turn for specialised support or follow-on services. A formal referral network is especially consequential for medium-sized and large firms (R3). DBT views the referral network as important, especially for potential inward referrals, though for outward referrals needs to remain 'commercially agnostic'.

Interviewees also drew attention to the conceptual narrowness with which export promotion is conventionally framed, advocating instead for a broader understanding of international trade. Importing should also be regarded as a trade complement, contributing positively to business activity, as R13 noted *‘[People] always talk about exporting rather than international trade, because politicians in particular always look at the importance of exporting, but actually businesses who export are also more likely to import and actually it is international trade that's important thing, not necessarily trade just going one way.’* The broader sentiment among interviewees was to strive for an effective and efficient EPN. Creating such network with a variety of sources of advice (both free and fee-paying) is important. Policy should support a sustainable EPN and consider its long-term viability when devising publicly funded export promotion programmes.

Workshop deliberations further corroborated the interview evidence, with stakeholders emphasising that the complexity of the EPN generated significant referral uncertainty among EPSPs, many of whom lacked reliable knowledge of when and to whom enquiries should be directed. Although there was some agreement on appropriate sources of support for highly technical issues, e.g., regulatory compliance, finance, or specialised training, consensus was absent in many other areas. This was complicated by the coexistence of free or subsidised services alongside fee-charging providers, which placed some EPSPs in direct competition. The resulting overlap in provision left firms with no clear means to select the best EPSPs, particularly for training and consultancy services, where the sheer number of suppliers and the lack of quality-assurance mechanisms made referral decisions practically intractable. Stakeholders agreed that improving communication, information sharing, and developing common approaches based on trust would help EPSPs navigate this complexity more effectively. However, the means to achieve this and the problems of overcoming divergent interests among the EPSPs were not clearly expounded.

4.4 Coordination within the EPN

Coordination can help firms overcome some dysfunctionalities, e.g., fragmentation and duplication, brought about by competition. This also highlights the uneven presence of leadership within the EPN, with coordination often relying on sometimes vague informal relationships rather than structured and clear collaborative processes. The interviewees widely acknowledged that considerable client overlap exists across the network (R4, R6) and that *‘there's enough business out there for all of us’* (R13). So, there is scope for better collaboration (R4). R6 further noted *‘We're just working for the same cause for the same clients. Let's make sure they can access as much as possible because that's what it's all about.’* Some interviewees commented on the existing collaborative mindset in West Yorkshire (R9, *Quote 14*; R10). This disposition constitutes an important precondition for effective coordination; some organisations expressed willingness to play a role in integrating dispersed support provision (R7, *Quote 15*).

Some programmes operate under a single brand but often have several delivery partners. Those organisations that are contracted to deliver export promotion programmes, e.g., West Yorkshire Export Boost and Innovate UK collaborated with or referred to partners delivering the same contract (e.g. Chamber International delivers 16 workshops funded by the Export Boost programme). In contrast, DBT, UK Export Finance, Innovate UK and Enterprise Europe referred clients to such programmes due to the funding available for firms (R11, *Quote 16*). Where services offered by organisations are complementary (e.g. IOE&IT and smaller chambers), this also offers opportunities for collaborative arrangements extending beyond formal contractual frameworks.

EPSPs highlighted several important preconditions for enabling referral and collaborative service delivery within the EPN. First, EPSPs that are less driven by KPIs and performance targets (e.g. Innovate UK) appear more willing to engage in partnership-based approaches and to refer firms to other providers better suited to meet specific needs – *‘We should be thinking about what’s the best service this company could receive to help them achieve what they want to achieve.’* Second, EPSPs that cultivate a clear sense of their own core competencies are demonstrably more inclined to direct firms towards organisations better positioned to provide specialist guidance (R3, R8). Rather than trying to offer all forms of support, organisations that recognise and accept their limitations are more inclined to direct firms toward others with complementary expertise. This is closely tied to the emergence of network specialisms, where certain actors are informally understood to have strengths in particular areas, such as market intelligence, sector-specific advice, or international compliance (R11, *Quote 17*; R8, *Quote 18*).

Greater organisational clarity of purpose engenders a more transparent and navigable EPN, enabling the competencies of individual EPSPs to be deployed more strategically, and sparing firms from being *‘passed from pillar to post’* (R15). Chamber International offers an instructive illustration: it is clear on where its strengths lie vis-à-vis DBT. DBT provides strategic advisory support – assisting clients with export planning, market selection, and customer identification – while chambers specialise in the operational mechanics of export execution, including documentation, regulatory compliance, and logistics. Positive behaviours, therefore, require awareness about the strengths of other organisations and the suitability of their programmes to clients. Lack of referrals may arise from a lack of understanding about where strengths lie in the network. Networks between organisations strengthen this possibility (R8), as do more communications about what network members are up to (R13).

In addition, facilitative leadership emerged as a critical factor in enhancing coordination across the EPN in the region. Some interviewees pointed to the need for a central actor to bring together the diverse range of export service providers, mediate competing organisational interests, and maintain momentum

in collaborative initiatives. WYCA was recognised as playing a coordinating role by some interviewees (R4; R10, *Quote 19*; R14; R16), given its regional mandate and ability to act as an institutional bridge between national bodies such as the DBT and local actors including chambers of commerce and business associations.

Interviewees also highlighted the potential for DBT to strengthen its regional facilitation function (R4, R5, R9), particularly in aligning strategic objectives and providing clarity around the roles of EPSPs. Others suggested that a neutral coordination role, either embedded within an existing institution (R2, R7) or established independently (R1, R6), could help sustain collaboration by offering impartial leadership and ensuring continuity. Overall, effective facilitative leadership was seen as essential for reducing duplication, fostering trust among actors, and creating a more coherent and accessible system of export support in the region.

Workshop deliberations largely echoed the interview evidence. Although many stakeholders considered that a collaborative mindset was evident in the EPN, differences in perceptions of where expertise resided were discernible. These divergent views led to disagreements among participants over which organisations should occupy central roles for particular types of support. Some suggested that the supplying of international trade advisers who could assess firm needs and direct them to appropriate providers would help address uncertainty among firms about what support they required. However, deeper disagreements persisted, especially around where expertise lay, whether services should be free or subsidised, who should supply such services, and when commercial fees were appropriate. These issues led to difficulties for effective coordination. Data-sharing emerged as another barrier: while sharing client information could improve referral accuracy, data protection laws significantly constrained what EPSPs could exchange, limiting more detailed analysis of client needs. Although stakeholders agreed that solutions to these coordination problems were possible in principle, they also acknowledged that implementation would be difficult due to the lack of clarity over facilitative leadership, and uncertainty about which organisations had the necessary resources and competencies to develop and sustain such coordinated systems.

4.5 Community-building for Export Promotion

Notwithstanding the challenges and complexities documented in the preceding sections, interviewees consistently acknowledged that EPSPs are embedded within a broader relational community constituted by inter-organisational networks and trust-based ties. These connections have the potential to facilitate information exchange and collective problem-solving (R1, R9, R11, R14, R15). Therefore, community captures the trust-based relationships, shared purpose and formal and informal connections that support

interaction among EPSPs. The community can be cultivated and strengthened via active collaborations grounded in a customer-centred approach and the facilitation of purposive inter-organisational networks.

Customer-centred approach

Problems associated with the ease and cost of access for firms highlighted a need for a more customer-centred approach. As mentioned above, insights from interviews and workshop indicated deficiencies within the EPN. The development of a strong community that takes a customer-centred approach, underpinned by a network of trust and specialised expertise, was highlighted by interviewees (R8, *Quote 20*; R13, *Quote 21*). Workshop evidence reaffirmed this priority, with participants identifying substantial benefits for both EPSPs and (potential) exporters. For EPSPs, being part of a well-connected community enables greater coordination, reduces duplication of services, and enhances the ability to refer clients to appropriate sources of support. It also fosters shared learning, joint problem-solving, and the development of more coherent and responsive support programmes, as R3 noted '*Speaking to other businesses who have 'done it', and hearing about their mistakes, is a way of learning how to export*'. For firms, particularly SMEs, a cohesive community of providers improves access to relevant information, reduces confusion when navigating the EPN, and cultivates trust in the services on offer. It also creates opportunities for peer learning and encourages sustained engagement with exports. Overall, a well-functioning customer-centred community helps align institutional efforts with the practical needs of (potential) exporters, leading to effective and inclusive export promotion.

Networking support

Networking activities participated by EPSPs and firms have great potential to contribute to the enhancement of the EPN. The interviews highlighted the critical role of export clubs and peer-to-peer networks in supporting firms, particularly during challenging periods like COVID-19 (R9, *Quote 22*; R12). There was a need for more collaborative approaches to business support, including better coordination among membership EPSPs, and businesses with strong social capital and well-developed networks were better positioned to adapt and succeed (R13, *Quote 23*). There was also a desire for spaces where businesses could share challenges and co-develop solutions with like-minded peers (R14, *Quote 24*).

Interviewees further recognised that organisations operating a 'coaching' model, as opposed to transactional or one-off advisory services, are well-placed to help businesses understand the complicated EPN. Their ongoing engagement with firms allows for a more holistic understanding of needs and increases the likelihood of appropriate referrals at different stages of the export journey, reducing the burden to navigate the complex support landscape themselves (R10, *Quote 25*). According

to R13, in the nearby area, Manchester, more emphasis is put on mentors and ‘human’ handholding via growth companies, rather than companies self-serving in a confusing landscape. Offering a One-Stop-Shop type of trade portal assumes a firm really *knows* what kind of support it needs, where a diagnostic from an advisor may be more advisable – *‘They may think they need, say, a grant, but they may actually need something more fundamental about the business that can be identified in a proper diagnostic’* (R13). Interviewees also emphasised the collective value of the data held across all the stakeholders and delivery partners in the EPN (R6). If GDPR permitted it, a client could have a single profile about their potential and journey throughout the lifetime of their business. This could be managed with support being brought in where necessary. For example, in Manchester there is already discussion on a data sharing agreement for more effective targeting of export potential (R5).

Furthermore, R9 explained that one of the key challenges for a trade portal is that it is an ever-changing landscape for funding, training, government policy, notice of programmes and their implications for businesses. The portal will therefore need resource and commitment from partners, to constantly feed it with the accurate information and updates that will make it a living, useful, relevant, trusted and authoritative resource, rather than one-dimensional list of organisations or replication of what it already being done elsewhere (R10). The portal needs ‘to be written in a language that businesses understand’ (R5) and ‘intuitive’ (R9). Moreover, a ‘support map’ could also appeal to businesses irrespective of where they are on their export journey (R4). As an example, in Indiana, each stage of the company journey is mapped out, then underneath each stage is stated who you should speak to along with other categories of support, like finance or regulatory support (R5). Finally, some interviewees shared the view that, in future, a more local approach or ‘place-based’ strategy is likely to be taken by national agencies. For example, R9 mentioned *“We are increasingly moving towards a place-based strategy where we recognize centres of excellence and therefore when it comes to West Yorkshire, we will try and align the delivery of our services more to what the customer base is. So we will try and move the skills within our team to be market and sector specialists that reflect the greater concentration of businesses in that environment.”*

Clearer offer for SMEs

Drawing from workshop discussions, SMEs were identified as particularly disadvantaged by deficiencies in the EPN. The SME sector was seen as the major area where substantial expansion of exports was likely to be available. While this sector was considered to have the greatest likelihood of boosting employment, productivity and growth, the lack of resources and exporting experience that most SMEs faced to develop business plans to begin or develop exports made the provision of effective, easy and low-cost access to help of particular importance. Yet, participants highlighted difficulties arising from eligibility criteria. Sometimes, SMEs, new to exporting may be missed out or might benefit

more from one-to-one support (R7). There is a perception that some EPSPs do not offer assistance to smaller firms (R12, *Quote 26*).

A recurring theme was related to firms seeking financial assistance, such as funding or grants (R1, R7, R10). To support the practical aspects of exporting, IOE&IT proposed the introduction of a voucher scheme that would enable SMEs to access timely, expert advice, particularly when responding to unexpected export orders. IoD expressed support for an internationalisation fund to provide grants to SMEs and first-time exporters, which could be used flexibly to access various types of export support. Several interviewees also suggested a simplified and centralised funding mechanism, rather than the current fragmented system of multiple funding streams from different sources, which adds to the complexity of the EPN (R1, R9). To ensure the quality and consistency of export promotion, interviewees also highlighted the need for regulation or professionalisation of EPSPs (R2). The proposed approaches include the accreditation or training of trade advisors (R14) and accredited training courses on exporting and internationalisation be made available through approved providers across the region (R2).

Workshop participants expressed broad consensus on the benefits of improving the coherence and consistency of the EPN. They highlighted that a well-designed ‘One-Stop-Shop’ would be very useful, especially for SMEs. The One-Stop-Shop envisaged by participants extended beyond a centralised online information portal, combining a single point of access with diagnosis of firm needs and active referral to the EPSPs and services best positioned to provide appropriate support. Participants also emphasised improvements in coordination, particularly for identifying firm needs and making referrals for training and consultancy-type services. They supported greater information sharing among EPSPs and the development of systems to generate a shared understanding of how collaboration should be organised and sustained. While participants believed that many conditions for collaborative governance are present in the regional EPN, they recognise the existence of serious obstacles.

In summary, adopting a mechanism-based perspective (Cornelissen & Werner, 2025), we conceptualise the 5Cs as operating through two types of causal mechanisms: situated mechanisms and generative mechanisms. Situated mechanisms establish the contextual and structural conditions within which the EPN operates. They are embedded in the system context and in inter-actor relations, shaping how collaborative governance can realistically take hold. Challenges, Competition and Complexity align squarely with this category. Challenges articulate the system context that motivates the existence of EPSPs and the EPN, explaining why collaborative governance is needed in the first place. Competition indicates the incentive structures that affects willingness to collaborate and the formation of trust, thereby explaining why collaboration is difficult. Complexity describes structure features that shape

how coordination must be organised. Together, these three Cs captures how collaboration begins, is constrained, and must be navigated within a fragmented system.

In contrast, generative mechanisms produce the observable governance and implementation outcomes. They explain why certain patterns of collaboration or dysfunction emerge and how collaborative governance (or failure) comes about in practice. Coordination and Community map onto these mechanisms. Coordination represents interactional routines that produce (or fail to produce) coherent, aligned and mutually reinforcing export support. Community captures the relational mechanisms of shared purpose and trust that upfold how the EPN becomes self-reinforcing or self-limiting. Together these two Cs generate the observable outcomes related to how export promotion policy is implemented across the network. Framing the 5Cs in this way provides a mechanism-based interpretation of the governance dynamics identified in the study and helps us address our three case-specific research questions systematically in the next section.

5. Discussion

Implementing policy through a fragmented network of independent organisations without hierarchical control and coordination presents a fundamental governance challenge. While the diversity of providers can broaden the range of expertise and resources available to firms in need of support, fragmentation also creates risks of duplication of services, information overload, problems in guiding firms to appropriate sources of support, and issues connected to who should ‘pay’ for services. These problems create challenges for the coherent policy delivery, particularly, in the long term. The CGF provides a useful lens for examining the governance conditions underlying policy implementation. While it identifies the governance conditions associated with effective collaboration, it offers limited guidance on how these conditions manifest themselves empirically within complex policy-delivery systems. Using the West Yorkshire EPN as an analytical case, this study demonstrates how key collaborative governance conditions become observable in practice through five empirically derived themes (5Cs).

From an IB policy perspective, this analysis also highlights the meso level as an important locus of policy implementation (Buckley, 2018). Policy stance and major interventions may be formulated primarily at the macro level through national decision-making, but their implementation is enacted through a regional EPN comprising EPSPs with different mandates, resources, incentives and organisational interests. The meso level is therefore not simply a conduit through which macro-level policy is transmitted to firms. The composition and governance of the EPN, including the distribution of authority and resources, facilitative leadership, incentives to collaborate and inter-organisational relationships, shape how policy is translated into accessible and coordinated support. This demonstrates

how meso-level governance can enable or constrain the implementation of macro-level policy objectives in practice.

< Table 3 Here >

Table 3 maps 5Cs onto key CGF conditions derived from Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015). The table demonstrates how the 5Cs operationalise the CGF by identifying the governance conditions that are most salient within the West Yorkshire EPN. The mapping highlights three important features. First, each of the 5Cs corresponds to one or more collaborative governance characteristics. Challenges, Competition, and Complexity capture the contextual and structural conditions within which collaborative governance unfolds. Coordination and Community reveal the relational and interactional dimensions of collaborative governance. Second, the mapping demonstrates that the 5Cs are interrelated rather than discrete categories. Specifically, Challenges, Competition, and Complexity are all associated with institutional legitimacy, accountability, and system context, while Competition and Complexity both relate to incentives for collaboration. This overlap reflects the interconnected nature of governance dynamics. Third, the table shows that many of the characteristics associated with effective collaborative governance are present within our case study – the West Yorkshire EPN, but often only partially or unevenly. The network exhibits important strengths, including legitimacy, shared purpose, recognised interdependencies, and a willingness to collaborate. However, weaknesses remain in accountability, coordination, leadership, and the alignment of incentives. These governance shortcomings help explain the dysfunctionalities identified in the study and provide the basis for the reform proposals discussed in Table 4.

The findings related to the first case-specific research question are evident across both the situated mechanisms associated with Challenges, Competition and Complexity and the generative mechanisms associated with Coordination and Community. The West Yorkshire case suggests that fragmented EPNs can achieve substantial institutional legitimacy when EPSPs possess recognised expertise, established mandates and stakeholder credibility. Indeed, the major EPSPs in the regional EPN were generally regarded as reputable organisations with competencies and resources for delivering export support. The findings therefore indicate that fragmented networks can establish a legitimate organisational base for policy implementation even in the absence of a formal coordinating authority. However, legitimacy of the EPSPs alone is insufficient to ensure effective policy implementation.

Accountability was also generally acknowledged, with EPSPs widely recognised as being responsible and answerable for their work. However, the case highlights a broader challenge for collaborative governance. Even when EPSPs enjoy legitimacy, accountability at both the organisational and the network level is difficult to establish, in the absence of robust performance metrics. Questions are raised

about the capability of the EPSPs because of the lack of robust metrics on the performance of the services provided and the effectiveness of the EPN as a whole. Without systematic evidence on exporters' outcomes, it is analytically intractable to assess whether export promotion policy had obtained its objectives. Reliable data on output measures such as growth of employment, productivity, firm growth, enhancement of innovation associated with the implementation of policy are not normally available, particularly for SMEs. As a result, the legitimacy of EPSPs and the EPN is not matched by equivalent accountability for policy delivery.

The findings further reveal substantive reservations about the distribution of power and resources across the EPN and incentives to collaborate coexisting with incentives to compete, creating tensions that constrained the development of more integrated forms of governance. Differences in organisational influence, funding arrangements, and performance-management systems generate tensions, especially where national, regional, membership and commercial actors overlap, and where KPI driven or funded programmes distort incentives. Where multiple EPSPs offered similar services, questions also arose about which EPSP was most qualified to assume leadership on specific aspects of export support. Meanwhile, most EPSPs recognised the value of collaboration and their mutual dependence in addressing the complex challenges faced by exporters. However, collaborative incentives were often weakened by competitive pressures, organisational protectionism, funding arrangements, and performance targets that encouraged organisations to prioritise their own activities and visibility. Such issues reflect the interaction of Competition and Complexity embedded within the EPN.

The evidence relating to Complexity further highlights both the strengths and limitations of the collaborative arrangements in the West Yorkshire EPN. Many EPSPs recognised their interdependencies and engaged in joint initiatives, shared promotional activities, referrals, and co-delivered programmes. However, knowledge of the capabilities, capacities, and areas of expertise of other EPSPs was often incomplete. As a result, organisations frequently lacked a clear understanding of how different providers could complement one another. Leadership was also widely recognised as necessary for coordinating activities across the network, yet there was little agreement regarding where such leadership should reside. The coexistence of multiple providers, overlapping mandates, and fragmented authority created uncertainty regarding both strategic direction and operational coordination.

These issues become particularly evident when considering the generative mechanisms of Coordination and Community. Existing collaborative processes, including awareness events, seminars/workshops on exporting issues, trade fairs, trade missions, referrals, training programmes, and assistance in obtaining finance, demonstrate a significant capacity for collective action within the network. Such activities suggest that many of the governance conditions associated with collaborative governance are already

present. However, collaborative capacity has not translated into fully effective coordination, reducing the coherence of policy delivery and increased the costs of navigating the export support landscape.

The Community dimension reveals a similar pattern. EPSPs generally shared a strong commitment to supporting exporters, particularly SMEs, and there was broad agreement regarding the desirability of greater collaboration and more coherent service delivery. Trust was also evident across much of the network and was frequently rooted in interpersonal relationships, regional networks, and a shared sense of purpose. Yet this trust was insufficient to overcome competing organisational interests, establish systematic referral mechanisms, or support stronger forms of collective governance.

Turning to the second research question that concerns both strengths and dysfunctionalities, as many of the strengths have already been discussed in addressing the first research question, we focus on the principal dysfunctionalities, as these provide the insight into the governance challenges that constrain policy implementation and inform the reform proposals developed in response to the third research question.

< Table 4 Here >

Table 4 brings the empirical findings on the governance of the EPN in West Yorkshire into dialogue with key collaborative governance characteristics. It summarises the major dysfunctionalities identified in the study and outlines both short-term actions and long-term institutional reforms that may strengthen policy implementation. The short-term actions largely involve incremental improvements to information sharing, transparency, referral mechanisms, and organisational learning, and therefore appear relatively feasible within existing governance arrangements. In contrast, the long-term institutional reforms involve more fundamental institutional changes relating to leadership, accountability, incentives, funding arrangements, and coordination structures. Their feasibility is considerably more uncertain because they imply significant changes for multiple EPSPs including existing roles, resources, and influence within the network.

Focusing on the dysfunctionalities, institutional legitimacy and accountability are challenged by instability in the wider policy environment. Frequent policy changes, short-term export promotion programmes, and shifting government priorities create uncertainty regarding which public EPSPs possess the long-term commitment and resources necessary to support exporters. Similar uncertainty arises from the dependence of some private-sector providers on temporary programmes and funding streams. Power and resource imbalances further create tensions regarding leadership, role allocation, and coordination responsibilities. These tensions persist within the EPN. Competition between EPSPs,

especially where some services were fee-based and others free or subsidised, created conflicting incentives that undermined trust and inhibit collaboration.

This was compounded by Complexity, which manifested through fragmented provision, overlapping mandates, information overload and the absence of an accepted source of facilitative leadership. Stakeholders repeatedly expressed concerns that firms were not effectively guided to the EPSPs best able to help. This was often regarded as being problematic due to unclear understanding by firms and EPSPs comprehension of what information firms needed and what developments in resources and competences were necessary for successful progression of exporting. The provision of information was prodigious with all EPSPs supplying plentiful generic information and some supplying very specific legal and technical information. Firms however often lacked clear guidance on how to navigate the avalanche of data, where good quality advice could be obtained, and was there quality control of provision by consultants and experts in management and technical issues. These problems were reinforced by limited understanding among both firms and EPSPs regarding the capabilities, competencies, and resources of different providers. Complexity was further exacerbated by uncertainty over leadership. Often there is no consensus on which EPSPs is the leader in particular areas, also there is no clear recognition of where facilitative leadership of the EPN should reside. While different actors identify WYCA, DBT, or a neutral coordinating body as the most appropriate convenor, in general focal leadership remains contested.

These governance weaknesses are most visible in relation to Coordination. Firms frequently experience information overload, the absence of clear guidance on high-quality support, and fragmented referral pathways. Problems of setting up and running collaborative programmes are evident in many areas, e.g., collaboration to reduce access cost for help by firms, enhance efficacy of referral systems, improvements in the help given to SMEs that struggle to understand what they need to do develop exporting, resolving the conflict over private/public provision and free/subsidised help. Furthermore, the complete absence of a quality-assurance framework governing training, consultancy, and technical advice collectively undermined the network's functional integrity. Although collaborative activity was extensive, there were few systematic mechanisms for directing firms through the EPN, consequently, the availability of support did not necessarily translate into ease of access or effective utilisation.

The Community dimension reveals a related set of challenges. While EPSPs broadly share a commitment to supporting exporters and improving export performance, differences in organisational interests continue to create tensions between collaboration and competition. Trust among organisations exists but is often rooted in interpersonal relationships and informal networks rather than institutionalised governance arrangements. Limited knowledge of the capabilities, expertise, and performance of other EPSPs further constrains trust and reduces confidence in referral and collaboration

arrangements. Thus, many of the relational foundations associated with collaborative governance were not sufficiently institutionalised to overcome the coordination challenges.

These dysfunctionalities point to the need for governance reform, relating to our third case-specific research questions. However, the existing export promotion policy implementation system is path dependent, reflecting historical developments that have shaped both the composition of the EPN and the roles undertaken by individual EPSPs. Consequently, reform is significantly affected by institutional inertia. Although interviewees/participants widely support for reforms to improve the EPN, substantive reforms are likely to generate both winners and losers and may therefore encounter resistances from EPSPs whose roles, resources, or influence could be affected. Overcoming governance deficiencies is not only a political and organisational issue but also a technical challenge, requiring detailed data to determine the incentives for EPSPs to accept necessary reforms that is not available in the present study.

Within these constraints, Table 4 identifies several possible reform paths that are intended to address the specific dysfunctionalities. One option is the development of a stronger collaborative governance arrangement characterised by a cooperative ethos among multiple independent service EPSPs and coordinated by facilitative leadership delivered by specialised organisations with agreed roles for particular areas of provision (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Another option is a more hierarchical delivery system with control and coordination exercised by a top-down leadership organisation where EPSPs are in essence sections of a unified system of policy interventions under the control of a ruling body. A third route is incremental reform in efforts to obtain marginal improvements in the efficacy of the EPN through enhanced accountability, coordination and transparency.

Stakeholders recognised that tackling major dysfunctionalities associated with Challenges, Competition and Complexity necessitates substantive innovation in both institutional design and operational practice. In the short term, proposals included greater use of interactive digital technologies, including AI, to help firms navigate the EPN more effectively, alongside organisational capability mapping to improve understanding of the capacities, competencies and specialisms of different EPSPs that would guide enquirers to appropriate sources of help. There was also strong support for introducing shared outcome measurement frameworks and greater transparency regarding the services and results delivered by providers. Moves towards One-Stop-Shop were widely supported: this would allow initial triage of firm needs, assessment of objectives, resources and competencies and more accurate referral to the EPSPs best positioned to deliver appropriate support. Such reforms, in principle, could be implemented relatively quickly within existing governance arrangements because they primarily require improvements in information management, transparency and organisational learning rather than major changes in authority structures. It is not clear however where the resources would come from to design, implement and sustain digital interactive online systems. Moreover, an online system that automatically

channelled enquirers towards EPSPs relevant to their needs has implications for the volume and type of referrals that would be received. This issue therefore connects to problems associated with resolving conflicts of interests among members of the EPN.

At the same time, resolving the deeper causes of dysfunction associated with the situated mechanisms would require longer-term institutional reforms. These included establishing programme continuity mechanisms to reduce policy volatility, introducing funding arrangements linked to shared performance measures, and clarifying leadership responsibilities across different areas of export support. It was widely acknowledged the value of creating systems to generate high-quality metrics on the firm level outcomes for export promotion programmes. This would enable effective assessment of policy implementation and highlight which programmes and EPSPs were needed to address dysfunctions in the EPN. However, given these reforms would involve more substantial changes on accountability, resource allocation and organisational influence, they are more difficult to implement than short-term operational improvements. As shown in Table 4, the distinction broadly corresponds to reforms targeting situated mechanisms in the short term (e.g., coordination, communication, transparency, and information sharing) and reforms targeting situated mechanisms in the longer term (e.g., leadership, incentives, accountability, and resource allocation).

Nevertheless, coordination failures remained pervasive: the absence of clear guidance on high-quality support, the lack of systematic referral processes, and the complete absence of a quality-assurance framework governing training, consultancy, and technical advice collectively undermined the network's functional integrity. Firms were not guided effectively to the EPSPs best positioned to help them, in part because the Community dimension was relatively weak. Several short-term initiatives were identified, such as introducing case management approaches to improve how SMEs are guided through the system, enhancing referral practices and reducing coordination costs. Similarly, increasing transparency through shared data and performance dashboards can improve mutual understanding among EPSPs and strengthen trust. Over the longer term, more effective EPN would require the development of formalised referral systems, structured data sharing protocols, and joint quality and outcome frameworks. Targeted trust building exercises between EPSPs would enable agreements to be forged on ways to avoid duplications, incoherence and poor-quality service provisions. The development of shared norms for collaboration rather than competition was also considered essential for improving the quality of the EPN. Establishing high-quality outcome metrics, particularly at the firm level would also be vital for Coordination through enhancing mutual accountability and establishing a shared sense of collective responsibility.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines how export promotion policy implementation unfolds within a complex, multi-actor EPN in which delivery is dispersed across heterogeneous, independent providers with overlapping mandates and fragmented authority. Compared to policy formation and development, the implementation of International Business policy has received limited attention. Drawing on the CGF and a multi-method case study of the West Yorkshire EPN, we shift attention to the governance conditions that influence policy implementation. In doing so, we show how overlapping mandates, fragmented authority, and competitive dynamics among EPSPs shape the lived reality of EPSPs to support firms effectively.

Our analysis identifies five interrelated themes – Challenges, Competition, Complexity, Coordination, and Community – that emerged from the data and are interpreted through the CGF. By situating these conditions within a mechanism-based perspective, we show that they operate through situated mechanisms and generative mechanisms. This distinction provides a clearer understanding of how governance dynamics in an EPN produce observable outcomes for policy delivery. Despite the availability of a comprehensive range of services, from generic information to highly specialised guidance, our findings highlight significant dysfunctionalities within the regional EPN, stemming from fragmentation, ambiguity of roles, weak collaboration, and tensions between coordination and competition.

In summary, by adopting a collaborative governance lens, we interrogate the governance conditions under which such networks succeed – or fail – to support the effective implementation of export promotion policy, highlighting the need for more coordinated, coherent and responsive governance arrangements to enhance the effectiveness of regional export promotion systems. Interpreted through the CGF, the 5Cs help make relevant collaborative governance conditions observable in practice. This structure helps diagnose governance challenges and identify opportunities for strengthening legitimacy, accountability and coordination across multiple independent EPSPs. More broadly, the study brings the meso level of IB policy implementation into sharper focus. It shows that the translation of nationally formulated policy into practice is shaped by the governance of the regional delivery network through which firms access support. The EPN therefore constitutes an important level of analysis between macro level policy formulation and firm-level engagement with policy implementation.

Beyond the West Yorkshire case, this study offers broader implications for policy implementation through fragmented multi-actor delivery systems. First, an appropriate network composition and legitimacy are insufficient for effective implementation when coordination and accountability at the network level remain weak. Second, heterogeneity in organisational mandates, resources and funding arrangements can generate simultaneous incentives to collaborate and compete, making role clarity and facilitative leadership particularly important. Third, where hierarchical coordination is limited, more

institutionalised referral arrangements, information sharing and shared performance measures can provide mechanisms for improving the coherence of policy delivery. These insights are relevant to policy systems characterised by dispersed authority, heterogeneous providers and limited hierarchical coordination. In more centralised systems, some of these dysfunctionalities may be less pronounced, although different trade-offs relating to legitimacy and accountability may arise. Comparative research across UK regions and other countries could examine whether these governance relationships and dysfunctionalities emerge under different institutional configurations and whether stronger hierarchical control improves role clarity and coordination while creating different trade-offs in legitimacy and accountability.

Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations that point to important avenues for future research. A major issue relates to the generalisability of the findings. The study is restricted to one region of the UK. Therefore, while offering analytical generalisation, it does not support statistical generalisation to other regional or national export promotion systems. The UK system is characterised by a relatively fragmented and multi-level delivery structure involving national and regional public bodies, membership organisations, and other independent providers, with no single regional authority exercising hierarchical control over the EPN. These institutional characteristics constitute important scope conditions for our findings. In more centralised systems, where a lead public agency exercises clearer authority over provider roles, resources, and coordination, dysfunctionalities associated with fragmented authority, contested leadership, overlapping mandates, and voluntary coordination may be less pronounced or may take different forms. Such systems may, however, involve different trade-offs relating to composition, coordination, legitimacy, and accountability. Our findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable primarily to settings characterised by dispersed authority, heterogeneous providers, and limited hierarchical coordination. Comparative research across systems with different degrees of hierarchical control would help establish how these institutional conditions shape the governance and effectiveness of export promotion policy implementation.

The second limitation of the study is the reliance on self-reporting by members of the EPN. While the study used a three-tier approach to triangulate the views of respondents, the risk of respondent bias cannot be entirely eliminated. Further research incorporating a wider range of views from different actors in EPSPs would help to provide a deeper understanding of how the EPN affects the effectiveness of export promotion policy.

Third, our study did not extend to the export promotion ecosystem, including banks, law firms, logistics providers, and other organisations for whom the implementation of export promotion policy is

subsidiary to their main activities. These actors form an important part of the broader business environment in which firms navigate export decisions. Notably, one of the key dysfunctionalities exposed in our study was information overload and overlap and incoherence in service provision; this is likely to be amplified by this wider ecosystem, particularly for SMEs. This issue connects to the need for further research on the interrelationship between multiple organisations that configure in ways that provide improved outcomes for firms (Freixanet & Federo, 2022).

Fourth, our study gained limited insights directly from firms. Several EPSPs included in the interviews are membership organisations, meaning that their representatives brought forward the experiences and concerns of their member firms. Additionally, a small number of participants in the stakeholder workshop were representatives from firms. However, we did not conduct systematic data collection from a broad range of firms. Consequently, the findings are best understood as reflecting how fragmentation and coordination challenges are perceived and addressed within the export support ecosystem, rather than providing a comprehensive assessment of exporters' experiences. Nevertheless, the evidence from respondents highlighted a universal view that confusion, duplication and incoherence in service provision were major dysfunctionalities in the EPN. Future research that directly included the views and experiences of firms would enhance understanding on the nature and significance of these dysfunctionalities in practice and how they affect firms' ability to access and benefit from export promotion support.

Finally, the study did not consider if a hierarchical approach that avoids many of the dysfunctionalities of the collaborative approach may not have other and perhaps more serious dysfunctionalities. Research on how export promotion policy (and wider IB policy) is implemented in different institutional milieu is necessary to better understand the impact of public policy.

Appendix A Research Background: EPSPs in the UK

The UK's Export Strategy, published in 2021, set out an ambitious export growth target of £1 trillion by 2030, underscoring the critical role of EPSPs in delivering frontline support to businesses. A wide diversity of EPSPs at the national and regional level are involved in export promotion in the UK. They include DBT, UK Export Finance (UKEF), Innovate UK Business Growth, various combined authorities (e.g., West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)), local councils (e.g., Leeds City Council), chambers, business associations and networks (e.g., Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Federation of Small Business (FSB), Yorkshire Asian Business Association (YABA), and West Yorkshire Academia-Industry Network) and professional membership bodies (e.g., IOE&IT). They collectively form an EPN, offering a variety of export promotion programmes. Many regional offices of national EPSPs operate beyond specific regions. For instance, DBT (Northern England)'s remit spans Northern England, often covering the broader Yorkshire and Humberside region including West Yorkshire. Additionally, several smaller regional offices of national organisations (e.g. UKEF, CBI, FSB) are mainly involved in conveying information about national programmes and collaborate with other organisations to deliver workshops, exhibitions, trade missions and seminars aimed at helping firms initiate or expand their export activities. The complexity and sometimes ad hoc nature of the networks and export promotion programmes and their entangled relations make it difficult for firms, especially SMEs, to navigate⁷. Recognising this, there have been ongoing policy discussions around the development of a "One-Stop-Shop" and "Single Trade Window" to simplify access to support⁸.

⁷ For reference, see the report by Federation of Small Business (2021), [Ready to Launch: How the Export Strategy can Supercharge Small Business](#).

⁸ One-Stop-Shop refers to a way for governments to provide services and improve regulatory delivery more efficiently and effectively. One example is the Single Trade Window which allows exporters to submit trade documents once, and for all agencies to access them. This will reduce transaction costs as exporters won't need to deal with multiple parties in different locations. In the UK, the "[Single Trade Window](#)" is proposed within the 2025 UK Border Strategy, published by the Cabinet Office in 2020, and [The Single Trade Window \(Preparation\) Regulations 2023](#) came into force on 8 May 2023.

Appendix B Research Context: Export Promotion in West Yorkshire

West Yorkshire's diverse economy, with its historical roots in textiles and manufacturing and its growing prominence in financial services, digital industries, and health technology, provides a rich context for this study. The region, including cities such as Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, and Huddersfield, has seen significant growth, driven by such sectors as financial services, digital and creative industries, manufacturing, and health technologies⁹. Exports play a crucial role in the economy. The region has a strong tradition of exporting goods, particularly in manufacturing, which includes textiles, machinery, and automotive components. Recently, there has been a growing emphasis on services exports¹⁰. The region's proximity to major transport networks, including road, rail, and air, facilitates its exporting. With its dynamic economy and strategic location, West Yorkshire has potential to enhance its global trade footprint through targeted export promotion strategies.

As mentioned in Appendix A, a wide diversity of organisations/actors are involved in regional export promotion. We undertake a qualitative network analysis for a comprehensive assessment of the institutional landscape for export promotion in West Yorkshire. The network was constructed through (1) systematic documentary analysis of policy documents, organisational websites, and other publicly available materials, (2) regular collaborative discussion with members of WYCA, and (3) validation during interviews and stakeholder workshop. In total, we identified 51 organisations (see Appendix Table A1).

Many EPSPs engage in export promotion as an adjunct to their main activities. They offer a range of services, varying in detail and scope, e.g. information on regulatory and documentation requirements, training courses, advice on developing business plans for exporting, guidance on obtaining finance, help in selecting target countries and markets, and access to trade missions. In many cases, the support involves directing businesses to appropriate sources of help; in others, the organisations themselves are the primary providers of these services. Some also offer a wide range of online help accessible to firms in West Yorkshire on exporting, e.g., Chamber International¹¹, WYCA¹², Institute of Export and International Trade (IOE&IT)¹³ and DBT¹⁴. It is worth noting that these 51 EPSPs do not include organisations such as the China-Britain Business Council (CBBC) and the UK India Business Council (UKIBC) that provide support to trade with specific countries. Our mapping approach, relying on empirically verifiable organisational connections that operate within West Yorkshire, did not identify

⁹ <https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/11997/full-indicator-report-final.pdf>

¹⁰ https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/10561/west_yorkshire_plan.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.chamber-international.com/>

¹² <https://tradewestyorkshire.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/>

¹³ <https://www.export.org.uk/>

¹⁴ <https://www.business.gov.uk/export-from-uk/support-topics/>

CBBC or UKIBC as active partners, collaborators, referrers, or service providers within the EPN. This reinforces the value of empirical network mapping as it shows that the formal policy landscape (actors that exist) may differ from the operational network (actors that are central to EPN).

Among 51 EPSPs, 15 engage substantively in export promotion services, including government agencies, local authorities, business support organisations, trade associations, and private-sector intermediaries. They can be broadly grouped into three major categories of actors: central hubs, business advocacy clusters and supporting and specialist actors.

Central hubs

At the centre of the network sits DBT and WYCA, both of which maintain a high number of direct connections that enables collaboration, information exchange, and resources flow across the network. DBT (via its North of England division) operates as a primary source of export-related information and advisory support. It undertakes the identification of firms with high export potential, organising trade mission and promotion events, and allocating international trade advisors to provide tailored, expert advice. DBT works with diverse partners to deliver the Export Academy¹⁵, helping businesses become better prepared and more confident in navigating global markets. These include financial institutions such as UK Export Finance (UKEF), which enables DBT to extend export finance specialist, innovation-focused entities like Innovate UK Business Growth, with whom DBT collaborates on international research and referrals to seek innovation advice, and business membership organisations such as Institute of Directors (IoD) and Yorkshire Asian Business Association (YABA), who are influential to DBT's understanding on the business needs. Collectively, these relationships, characterised by structured referrals, event-based engagements, and targeted capability building, illustrates DBT's central position in disseminating guidance and resources throughout the network.

Meanwhile, WYCA functions as a regional coordination hub. It maintains extensive connections with a range of stakeholders, including business membership organisations (e.g., Federation of Small Business (FSB), Confederation of British Industry (CBI)), international trade entities (e.g., IOE&IT), and local chambers of commerce (e.g., West & North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce (WNYCC), Chamber International). Those ties enable consultation (policy signalling), collaboration (co-design of initiatives), and communication (signposting, outreach) among EPSPs. Leveraging the information and resources derived from connections, WYCA has developed initiatives such as the Trade Portal¹⁶, aiming to provide comprehensive and tailored advice to businesses in West Yorkshire. In this sense, WYCA

¹⁵ <https://www.business.gov.uk/export-academy/>

¹⁶ <https://tradewestyorkshire.org.uk/>

acts as a strategic bridge between local business needs and the broader national policy framework, functioning as a key broker within the network.

Business advocacy clusters

Surrounding the central hubs are several prominent business representation and advocacy organisations. Chambers of Commerce are regarded as trusted intermediaries between business community, government, and international market. Their ties are primarily service-delivery oriented, providing training courses and consultancy to help local businesses understand “how to export”, navigate foreign market and regulatory environment, and issue essential export documents. WNYCC, Chamber International and Mid-Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce are local chambers supporting (potential) exporters. They collaborate with WYCA and IOE&IT to facilitate local business export readiness, market access, and practical trade support.

Business membership organisations, e.g., YABA, FSB, IoD, and CBI (the last three are West Yorkshire offices of national organisations), form a second advocacy cluster. They represent the voice of businesses, both SMEs and large firms, across different sectors. A core function of those organisations is to advocate for exporters, regularly engaging with government entities, including DBT and WYCA, to influence trade strategy. Their involvement helps ensure that the export policy and support are inclusive and aligned with business needs. In other words, this cluster is vital in shaping policy direction and amplifying business voices in the region.

Supporting and specialist actors

Several organisations occupy supporting and specialist positions at the edge of the network. Exemplar and Enterprise Europe Network Yorkshire (RTC North as the local contact point in West Yorkshire) engage mainly through contracted programme delivery (e.g., export promotion programmes and training courses), rather than strategic coordination. As a result, their integration into the network appeared limited. Stronger collaboration with the chambers and business membership organisations, such as shared referral protocols and co-branded outreach, would likely improve the accessibility and effectiveness of network resources.

Additionally, Innovate UK Business Growth and Health Innovation Yorkshire & Humber are innovation-led specialist. They are essential for promoting sector-specific and innovation-driven export strategies. Their impact is primarily channelled through collaborative links with WYCA and DBT, allowing them to provide targeted support businesses in emerging and high-tech sectors.

Appendix Table A1 The list of EPSPs in West Yorkshire

	EPSP	Connections	Data Sources
1	Department for Business and Trade (DBT) ^a	2, 7, 8, 12, 15	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-international-trade-support-from-regional-teams-in-england (accessed at 22/11/2023)
2	West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 20, 28, 29, 48, 49	https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/all-news-and-blogs/mayor-launches-programme-to-drive-international-growth-of-games-tv-culture-and-arts-businesses/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.wybusiness-skills.com/all-case-studies/business-growth-for-trinity-mcqueen/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.wybusiness-skills.com/news-archive/2019-archive/npif-investments-in-leeds-reach-20-million/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/our-partners (accessed at 31/12/2025)
3	Institute of Export and International Trade (IOE&IT)	2, 4, 6, 7, 16, 20	https://www.export.org.uk/search/?term=University (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/our-partners (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.export.org.uk/news/news.asp?id=320407&hhSearchTerms=%22west+and+yorkshire%22 (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.export.org.uk/page/Partnerships?&hhsearchterms=%22university%22 (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.export.org.uk/insights/chartered-institute-news/ioe-is-the-perfect-partner-for-our-journey-say-uk-export-finance/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
4	West & North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce (WNYCC)	2, 3, 5, 17, 18, 19, 24, 32, 33	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.htafc.com/news/2026/january/09/wny-chamber-of-commerce-partner-with-town/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
5	Chamber International ^b	2, 8, 16, 51	https://www.chamber-international.com/news/latest-news/nina-sets-exam-success-record-for-chamber-international/ (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.chamber-international.com/news/latest-news/export-champions-share-tricks-of-the-trade/ (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.chamber-international.com/events/partner-events/19-september-2012-supporting-our-exporters/ (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.chamber-international.com/resources-for-imports-exports-and-international-trade/international-import-and-export-promotion/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.chamber-international.com/resources-for-imports-exports-and-international-trade/useful-links-for-import-and-export-companies/ (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.chamber-international.com/events/partner-events/made-in-west-yorkshire-sold-to-the-world/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)

6	Mid-Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce	3, 21	https://my-chamber.co.uk/learn-more/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
7	UK Export Finance (UKEF)	1, 2, 3	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/partnership-agreement-between-dbt-and-uk-export-finance (accessed at 22/11/2023)
8	Yorkshire Asian Business Association (YABA)	1, 5, 20, 21, 23, 26, 27, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
9	Federation of Small Business West Yorkshire (FSB)	2, 16	https://www.fsb.org.uk/resources-page/what-are-local-enterprise-partnerships.html (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.fsb.org.uk/resources/article/jane-walton-fsb-education-and-childcare-policy-chair-MCDTH367CPHFD7TJWG3QDJGSC64I (accessed at 31/12/2025)
10	Confederation of British Industry (CBI)	2, 11, 16	https://www.cbi.org.uk/search/?term=LEP (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/what-is-the-future-of-local-enterprise-partnerships-leps/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
11	Yorkshire & Humber Academic Health Science Network (AHSNs)	2, 10, 16, 22, 31	https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/how-we-can-help-you/industry/funding-opportunities/business-growth-grant-leeds-lep/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/blog/unlocking-the-north-of-englands-true-potential-as-a-global-leader-in-life-sciences/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/how-we-can-help-you/industry/international-support/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/how-we-can-help-you/industry/funding-opportunities/business-growth-grant-leeds-lep/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/about-us/who-we-work-with/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/blog/unlocking-the-north-of-englands-true-potential-as-a-global-leader-in-life-sciences/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
12	Innovate UK Business Growth ^c	1	https://apply-for-innovation-funding.service.gov.uk/competition/1567/overview/7e769b4f-0d09-40b0-a30e-e010162288d7 (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://apply-for-innovation-funding.service.gov.uk/competition/2244/overview/84f81488-4936-4551-a315-7ec40cf1065d (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.linkedin.com/posts/innovate-uk-london_globalentrepreneurprogramme-innovation-ukgrowth-activity-7391429132699734019-hujl/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
13	RTC North ^d	2	https://www.pro-manchester.co.uk/members/rtc-north/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
14	Exemplas	2, 21	https://exemplas.com/2026/01/west-yorkshire-business-boost-export-programme-supports-wellolas-expansion-into-the-us-healthcare-market/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)

15	Institute of Directors (IoD)	1	https://www.iod.com/news/chartered-director/international-role-of-the-director-and-board/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
16	Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership (LEP) ^c	2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19	https://www.wybusiness-skills.com/news-archive/2019-archive/npif-investments-in-leeds-reach-20-million/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
17	Leeds City Council	4	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
18	York City Council	4	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
19	Bradford City Council	4	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
20	University of Leeds	2, 3, 8	https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/our-partners (accessed at 31/12/2025) https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
21	Leeds Beckett University	4, 6, 8, 14	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
22	University of York	4, 11	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
23	University of Bradford	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
24	Huddersfield Town	4, 8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023) https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
25	Bradford College	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
26	Leeds Trinity University	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
27	University of Huddersfield	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
28	York St John University	4	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
29	UKIE (the association for UK Interactive Entertainment)	2	https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/our-partners (accessed at 31/12/2025)
30	Indielab	2	https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/our-partners (accessed at 31/12/2025)
31	British Chambers of Commerce	11	https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/about-us/who-we-work-with/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
32	ARUP	4	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
33	PIB Insurance	4	https://wnychamber.co.uk/patrons/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)
34	Schofield Sweeney	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)

35	Squire Patton Boggs	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
36	NatWest	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
37	AIA	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
38	Together	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
39	Marshall Woolridge	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
40	Chadwick Lawrence	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
41	FDS	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
42	PWC	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
43	LLOYDS Bank	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
44	LCF Law	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
45	RSM	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
46	Zeal consultancy	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
47	Blacks Solicitors	8	https://www.yabauk.com/corporate-partners/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
48	Trinity McQueen	2	https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/our-partners (accessed at 31/12/2025)
49	British Business Bank	2	https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/business/our-partners (accessed at 31/12/2025)
50	Association of British HealthTech Industries	11	https://www.healthinnovationyh.org.uk/about-us/who-we-work-with/ (accessed at 22/11/2023)
51	Leeds Bradford International Airport	5	https://www.chamber-international.com/resources-for-imports-exports-and-international-trade/useful-links-for-import-and-export-companies/ (accessed at 31/12/2025)

Notes: ^a Previously Department of International Trade (DIT). ^b Part of WNYCC. ^c Previously Innovate UK Edge. ^d Local contact point of Enterprise Europe Network Yorkshire. ^e From October 2023, the LEP became known as West Yorkshire Business and Skills, a part of WYCA.

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Author Biographies

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Table 1 The Profiles of Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Current Position
1	F	Manager
2	M	Director
3	F	Director
4	F	Manager
5	F	Director
6	M	Manager
7	F	Manager
8	F	Manager
9	M	Manager
10	M	Leader
11	F	Leader
12	M	Director
13	M	Manager
14	M	Leader
15	F	Leader
16	F	Manager

Notes:

1. To ensure interviewee anonymity and confidentiality, we have used generic role descriptors throughout the analysis.
2. The term "Manager" encompasses a range of senior and mid-level positions, including CEO, departmental or functional managers, partnership managers, and development managers. The term "Leader" refers to positions such as Chair and Team Leader. This approach protects identities while preserving the organisational context necessary for analysis.
3. The interviewees' organisations include CBI, Chamber International, DBT, Exemplas, Export Boot Camps, FSB, Innovate UK Business Growth, IoD, IOE&IT, Mid-Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce, RTC North, UKEF, and WYCA.

Table 2 Supportive Interview Data

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotations		Respondent (R)
Challenges	Exporters' challenges	Quote 1	<i>The only way we will drive changes in the economy is to have businesses becoming much more productive. International trade is probably one of the best vehicles for upscaling staff, driving productivity, driving growth, bringing greater wealth into the region...but we've still got a long way to go.</i>	R9
		Quote 2	<i>On the point of a single point of access, you might have seen the recently launched West Yorkshire trade portal that the WYCA has put out, which is probably the first step to bringing order.</i>	R14
		Quote 3	<i>It's still up for debate, but the trade portal will be captured up into that as in a sense that we've already looked at and that being a keyway to do it across the whole support ecosystem.</i>	R16
	Export environment challenges	Quote 4	<i>There's a lot of businesses who haven't made that step into exporting properly because they've just stopped at the first rung and the first thing has just become too, too hard.</i>	R13
		Quote 5	<i>We need to address this idea that it's impossible to trade internationally. It's really not. I think we also have to understand that most of our trade is going to be with mainland Europe. And you know we have these messages from policymakers that we want to go to America, India and China.... But our core business is often going to be with the countries nearest to us.</i>	R13
Competition	Tensions between EPSPs	Quote 6	<i>I think where an organisation has got very specific deliverables that they have to meet, then there is a bit of a natural inclination to hang on to people because they want the outcomes for their funding.</i>	R7
		Quote 7	<i>I think the problem with the programmes is that they're only temporary in nature. They're there to serve a particular purpose at that time, and then either funding is withdrawn, political positions change, regional positions change, or local democracies change.</i>	R14
		Quote 8	<i>I'd like policymakers to better understand the existing ecosystem and how they can support existing providers rather than always looking to provide a service that might not be necessarily needed. We need to understand that paid-for support is also an important part of the business ecosystem and how it works.</i>	R13
	Protectionism	Quote 9	<i>Where you get a bit of competition is where people have the contracts to deliver support and they're up against targets and not delivering. If you've got contracted outputs, and you've got to get 50 ticks on a sheet in a month [and feel under pressure to deliver], you're not going to be choosy about who you work with. I'm not convinced that the right person is always working with the right business.</i>	R13
Com		Quote 10	<i>I think if I was new to export and was confronted with that map, I would just go, oh my word, I don't know where to start and we won't bother.</i>	R3

	Functionality of the complex structure	Quote 11	<i>I think that those looking at export for the first time have got no idea where to go, for help advice and guidance.</i>	R12
		Quote 12	<i>I do have big concerns all the time that it's confusing for companies, you know, where do I go for support?</i>	R7
	Non-consensuable focal points	Quote 13	<i>We are somewhere, three or four lines off despite working with 400 exporting businesses. If you win a contract [to deliver export services], all of a sudden you become a major partner. Because you've won a contract based on criteria that no one knows about, and all of a sudden get direct access to the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.</i>	R12
Coordination	Collaborative mindset	Quote 14	<i>[It does feel that in West Yorkshire] there's a collaborative willingness to work together for the betterment of clients and members and constituents.</i>	R9
		Quote 15	<i>What we've been doing there is kind of trying to help them find potential partners who they could collaborate with in order to develop new products and based on their expertise in the area of wool. And on that one, we've posted kind of collaboration opportunities.</i>	R7
		Quote 16	<i>There are referrals between DBT and UK Export Finance and of course Innovate UK and Enterprise Europe, because [they] hold the contract and leads are being passed through daily.</i>	R11
	Specialised expertise	Quote 17	<i>Everyone with specialisms has a place in this market... But it's [all] just how it's portrayed to the clients.</i>	R11
		Quote 18	<i>If we create an ecosystem of specialisms, then what will happen is that then that recipient or that person who's inquiring will get the best possible support. You really need to understand what it is you do [area of specialism] because you can't be all things to all people. ... If we create a good ecosystem, then that customer gets really good, valuable service.</i>	R8
	Facilitative leadership	Quote 19	<i>I like the way it's happening in West Yorkshire because I think it's kind of joined up and everyone knows where they sit within that [WYCA] umbrella.</i>	R10
Community	Customer-centred approach	Quote 20	<i>I think what we need to do is create an ecosystem of trust and making sure that we're keeping the customer at the heart of what we're trying to do and doing the best for them - then understanding who is it that does what [is important]</i>	R8
		Quote 21	<i>I mean, it is about being generous, is it's about understanding what you're good at and what other people are good at and knowing who's best [and referring on].</i>	R13
	Network support	Quote 22	<i>Sometimes businesses prefer to trust peer to peer. Sometimes, where businesses get their internal trust mechanisms from, or you know, or networking mechanisms is highly important.</i>	R9
		Quote 23	<i>During lockdown the business owners who did best, tended to have the best networks. Individuals with the strongest social capital, often did better and could cope... I think a lot of our role is about building business networks. ... it's about everyone who's involved in business support being a bit smarter and being more generous and how we work and connecting people better... We've got more members [that could benefit from networking] ..., so actually we've all got to work together to bring all our respective memberships together because then we might get some sort of relevant numbers.</i>	R13

		<i>Quote 24</i>	<i>I would want a place where I can go and discuss the challenges I'm having with like-minded individuals and organisations and collectively come up with ways of how we can make it much easier for all our peers rather than taking that individual approach.</i>	R14
		<i>Quote 25</i>	<i>We want them to get the best support, whoever looks after them...We don't do everything...and will pass on to others at the right time... with the advantage that [firms] don't have to understand who everyone is</i>	R10
		<i>Quote 26</i>	<i>DBT is only interested in big businesses, not SMEs, the area we cover. The big businesses don't make decisions locally, so it's the SME's and they get little service from DBT, or access to it.</i>	R12

Table 3 Mapping the 5Cs onto CGF Conditions and the Empirical Manifestation in the West Yorkshire EPN

Theme	Generic characteristics of collaborative governance*	Manifestation in the West Yorkshire EPN
Challenges/ Competition/ Complexity	Institutional legitimacy, accountability and system context	• Export challenges create the system context that underpins the existence of the EPN. • The EPN has a degree of institutional legitimacy insofar as the major EPSPs are considered as reputable and appropriate providers. • However, accountability is weakened by fragmented provision and responsibilities, overlapping mandates, competition on delivery of services with inadequate information for users on the quality of help available from EPSPs, and policy instability.
Competition	Power/resources imbalances requiring resolution	• EPSPs have different levels of power and resources, sometimes generating tensions. • However, these tensions are often now effectively addressed due to lack of appropriate facilitative leadership.
Competition/ Complexity	Incentive to collaborate	• EPSPs are motivated to work together to achieve major goals. • However, incentives are uneven and undermined by tensions, protectionism, and competition.
Complexity	Understanding interdependencies	• Many EPSPs recognise mutual interdependencies and engage in joint initiatives, shared promotion activities and referral. • However, understanding of each other's capabilities is limited.
	Facilitative leadership	• Leadership is recognised as necessary, at least in principle. • However, multiple providers, overlapping mandates, and fragmented authority create uncertainty over who should provide such leadership.
Coordination	Collaborative processes	• Collaboration is strong in some areas and between some EPSPs. • However, coordination failures remain pervasive.
Community	Shared purpose	• EPSPs share a common goal, especially around improving export support for SMEs and creating a more coherent, customer-centred One-Stop-Shop. • However, agreement weakens when questions of cost, delivery model and provider roles arise and who should and is able to provide an effective One-Stop-Shop.
	Trust	• Trust exists between many EPSPs and is rooted largely in interpersonal relationships, regional networks and shared community identity, which partially compensate for weak formal governance arrangements. • However, weak formal governance can make it difficult to resolve issues for which informal interpersonal relationship cannot provide effective solutions.

Note: *These characteristics are derived from Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015).

Table 4 Governance Dysfunctionalities and Reform Options

Generic characteristics of collaborative governance	Major dysfunctionalities	Possible mitigation of dysfunctionalities by developing collaborative governance		Prospects for reforms
		Reform strategies	Actions (<i>Lead actor/s</i>)	
Institutional legitimacy	Legitimacy is conditional and fragile. The institutional turbulence in the UK towards business support – frequent policy changes, short-term export promotion programs, and shifting government priorities – creates uncertainty about which public EPSPs have long-term commitment and resources for export promotion. The dependency on temporary programmes in the private sector also contributes to turbulence in the institutional systems that may undermine legitimacy and accountability.	<u>Short-term:</u> Gradually build trust through improved information exchange and increased transparency.	Implement shared outcome metrics and develop public performance dashboard (<i>WYCA</i>)	Resistance from some EPSPs, especially private-sector actors affected by changes to their roles and influence, may constrain the pace and depth of collaboration. Longer-term reforms are contingent upon sustained commitment from participating EPSPs and, critically, upon institutional reform that grants, legitimates, and provides stable institutional backing for facilitative leadership role(s). Without this, the problem will persist and will impede the solutions to the other dysfunctionalities contained in this table.
		<u>Long-term:</u> Develop adaptive governance systems capable of responding quickly to radical and often unexpected institutional turbulence. Introduce programme continuity guidelines.	Establish formal coordination forum with rapid-response mandates as system-level trust and accountability improve (<i>DBT/WYCA</i>)	
Power/resources imbalances requiring resolution	Power imbalances are evident. Failure to recognise the central role of major player(s) in particular areas leading to competitive attitudes especially among the larger EPSPs. Uneven distribution of authority, resources, and influence creates tensions over leadership, role allocation, and coordination responsibilities.	<u>Short-term:</u> Establish mutual understanding of roles and mandates to reduce territorial behaviour.	Increase dialogue regarding organisational roles, responsibilities and mandates (<i>DBT/WYCA</i>)	Progress depends on focusing resources and direction on identifying and empowering ‘best’ EPSPs through transparent, legitimate and accountable processes. As redistribution of roles and influence may generate resistance, meaningful improvement cannot be realized unless clear role differentiation is accepted by key EPSPs.
		<u>Long-term:</u> Develop legitimate and accountable governance mechanisms that clarify responsibilities and recognise lead EPSPs and effectively coordinates the EPN.	Designate lead EPSPs by type of provision (information, technical requirements, training); formal governance mechanisms (<i>DBT/WYCA</i>)	

Incentive to collaborate	The EPN does not clarify when to collaborate versus compete in supply of the same or similar services, and to guide firms to ‘best’ EPSPs in accord with the requirements of firms.	<u>Short-term:</u> Develop shared understanding of capacities and competencies to identify when collaboration serves firms better than competition.	Facilitate communication and discussion on competencies and develop customer-centred referral protocols (DBT/chambers)	Enhancing collaboration requires greater clarity over organisational specialisms, weaker target-driven competitive pressures, and more robust customer-centred referral arrangements. However, fundamental changes to funding and evaluation systems are likely to be politically sensitive; deeper collaboration will be out of reach if this is not addressed.
		<u>Long-term:</u> Formalise referral systems and shared performance matrices that reward collaboration.	Design shared KPIs; co-delivery targets; formal referral incentives (DBT/WYCA)	
Understanding of interdependencies	A limited understanding about the nature and quality of the capacities and competencies of the EPSPs, combined with divergent interests, undermines effective recognition of the interdependencies.	<u>Short-term:</u> Create mechanisms for mapping capabilities and sharing information to make interdependencies visible.	Create a centralised capability map and introduce a coordination platform for alignment (WYCA) Develop a One-Stop-Shop referral and triage system (WYCA)	Mapping and information sharing exercises can build shared understanding across EPSPs, creating a foundation for more integrated governance arrangements over time. However, without agreement on organisational roles, long-term integration cannot be achieved, and coordination platforms will remain superficial.
Facilitative leadership	Leadership is contested, with different actors identify WYCA, DBT, or a neutral coordinating body as the most appropriate convenor. Often there is no consensus on which EPSPs is the leader in particular areas, also there is no clear recognition of where facilitative leadership of the EPN should reside. This makes effective governance of the complexities of the	<u>Long-term:</u> Identify and accept distributed leadership spearhead to resolve dysfunctionalities caused by complexity. Establish clear leadership in strategic issues to structure the	Distributed leadership model (lead EPSP/s per area) and coordination forums to address strategic issues (DBT/WYCA)	Designating leadership may encounter resistance where it implies a loss of autonomy or influence. Facilitative leadership cannot be imposed directly but depends on enabling conditions. While short-term efforts on role clarification and improved trust can support incremental coordination, effective governance is elusive unless a recognised leader emerges.

	EPN difficult especially during policy shifts.	complex interactions in the EPN.		
Collaborative processes	Processes are inefficient and user-unfriendly. Firms experience information overload, fragmented referral pathways, and difficulty identifying the most appropriate EPSPs. Problems of setting up and running collaborative programmes are evident in many areas, e.g., collaboration to reduce access cost for help by firms, enhance efficacy of referral systems, improvements in the help given to SMEs that struggle to understand what they need to do develop exporting, resolving the conflict over private/public provision and free/subsidised help.	<u>Short-term:</u> Introduce mechanisms for guided support pathways to improve firm access.	Adopt a case management approach to guide SMEs through the EPN and coordinate referrals between public and private-sector providers (<i>chambers</i>)	Developing more effective collaborative processes requires more systematic referral arrangements and clearer differentiation of provider roles. Short-term measures can improve the consistency and effectiveness of interactions across EPSPs, and over time these practices can be formalised into structured, system-wide collaboration. However, network-wide collaboration is unattainable except where tensions between public, private, subsidised, and commercial provision are resolved.
		<u>Long-term:</u> Develop systematic collaborative processes, including clearer referral pathways, stronger role differentiation across EPSPs, and shared quality and outcome frameworks.	Develop shared digital platform and introduce structured referral protocols (<i>DBT</i>) Use WYCA Trade Portal as an integrated one-stop-shop (<i>WYCA</i>)	
Shared purpose	Shared purpose is abstract; conflict is concrete. Divergence of interests among EPSPs about collaboration versus competition for the same or similar services, and free/subsidised as opposed to commercial fees.	<u>Long-term:</u> Develop communication and discussion to build understanding on how best to achieve shared purpose, particularly when to collaborate rather than compete.	Formalise collaborative agreements across EPSPs that outline roles and commitment; Develop a regional framework to clarify the roles of subsidised provision; Design shared pricing and service guidelines (<i>DBT/WYCA</i>)	Strong resistance may emerge where solutions could lead to loss of key activities by some EPSPs. Ongoing dialogues and clearer articulation of complementary roles can strengthen alignment around a shared purpose, but unless they yield workable solutions, concrete conflicts will continue to overshadow abstract purpose.

Trust	Trust exists but is interpersonal and local. Formal mechanisms remain weak, leaving collaboration vulnerable to staff changes. The lack of understanding on what the various EPSPs do, including a lack of knowledge about the capacities, competencies and qualities of the provision by EPSPs undermines trust.	<u>Short-term:</u> Increase transparency of services, capabilities, and outcomes.	Create public performance dashboards and service directories (<i>WYCA</i>)	Increased transparency of services and outcomes can strengthen shared understanding and trust, but may face resistance where it affects the roles and influence of some EPSPs. Unless data sharing is incentivised and formal mechanisms are established, trust is likely to remain interpersonal and vulnerable to staff changes, and deeper cooperation cannot be sustained.
		<u>Long-term:</u> Incentivise information sharing across EPSPs.	Data sharing across EPSPs as a condition for accessing public funding (<i>DBT/WYCA</i>)	

Note: A recurring issue across several governance dimensions is the absence of robust firm-level outcome metrics, which constrains accountability, trust, coordination, and evaluation of policy effectiveness.

Figure 1. The Chain of Public Policy

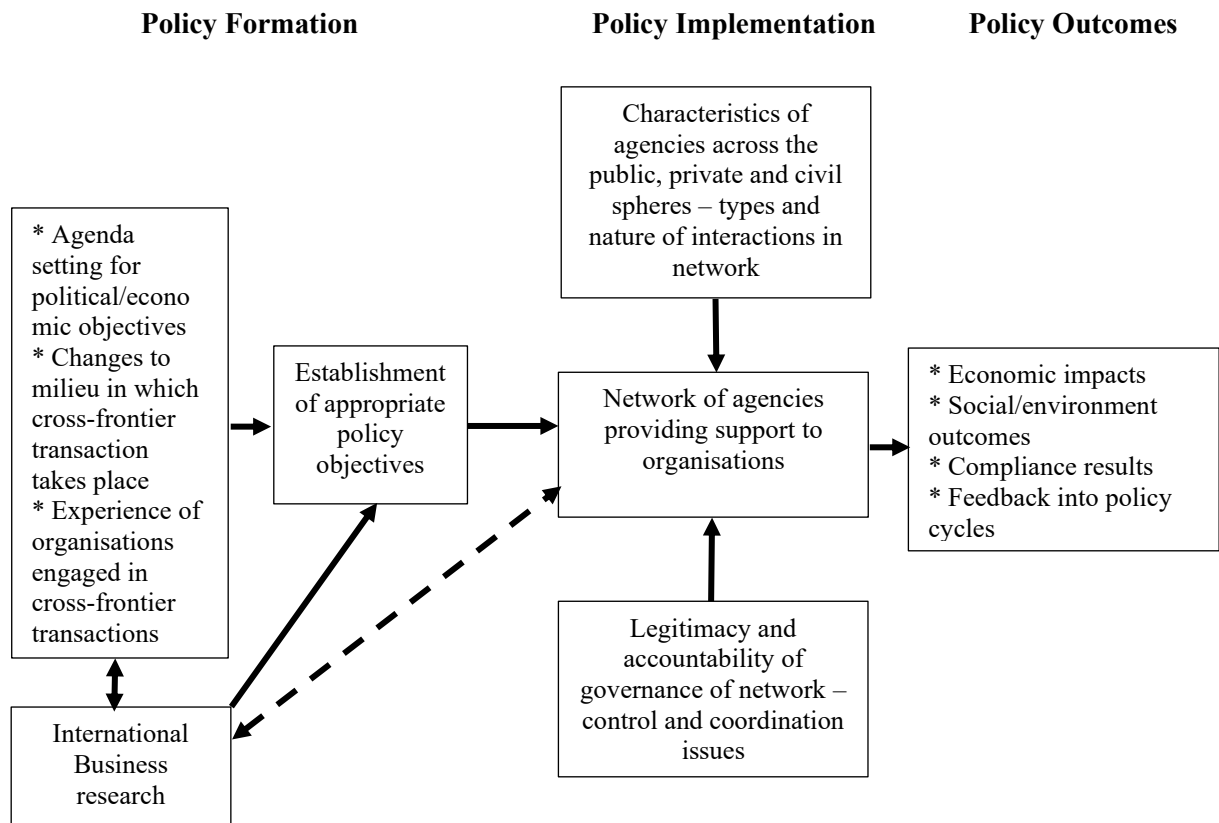


Figure 2 EPN in West Yorkshire, the UK

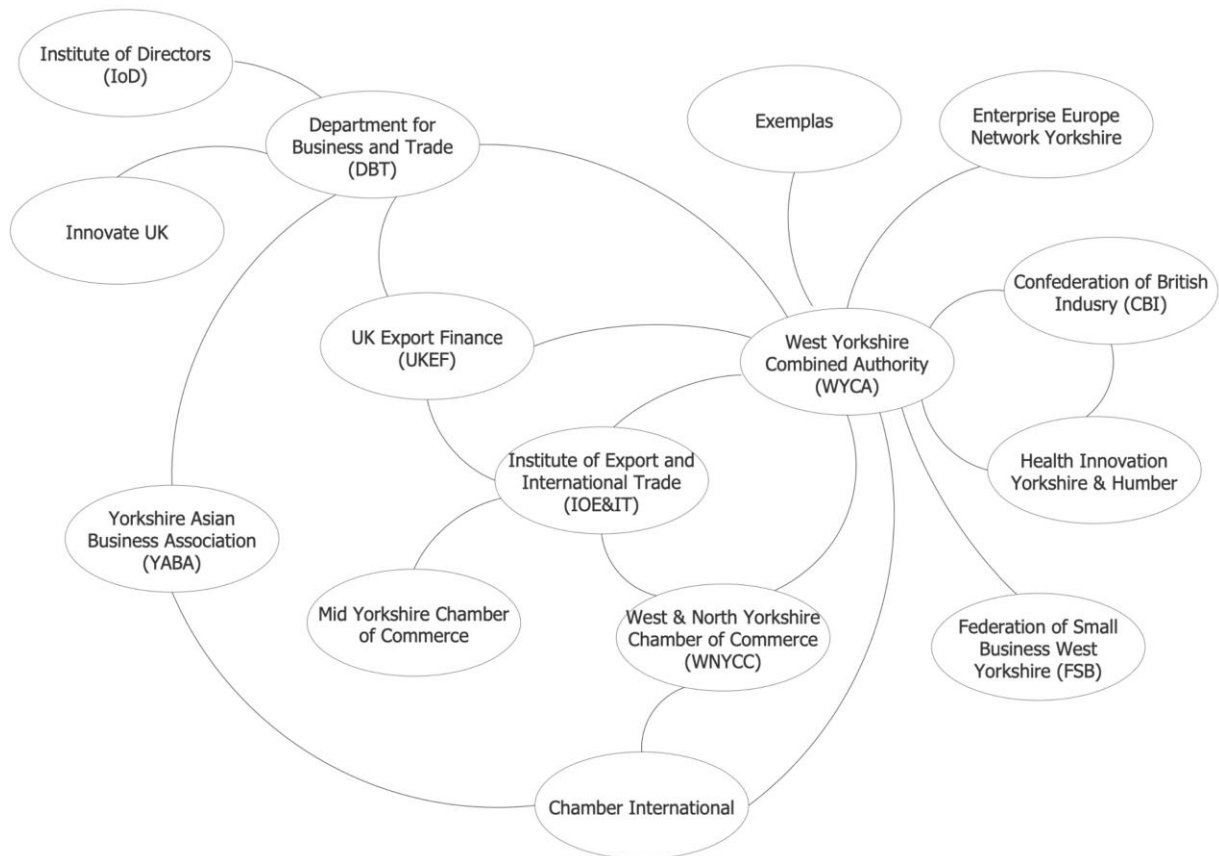


Figure 3 Data Structure

