SFEDI®

WHITE PAPER

A shared standard for business support

The SFEDI Business Support Standards: why they exist, what they contain and how to use them

For business support professionals, employers, commissioners, funders, training providers and professional bodies.

SFEDI, November 2026

Reflects version 1.7 of the SFEDI Business Support Standards

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Contents

	Summary	3
1	Why business support needs a shared standard	3
2	Where the Standards come from	4
3	What the Standards contain	5
4	The principles behind the Standards	6
5	How the Standards are used	7
6	How SFEDI recognises professionals	8
7	Keeping the Standards current	9
	Sources	9

Summary

Business support depends on trust. A business owner who takes advice on their finances, their staff or their next stage of growth is trusting that the person advising them knows what they are doing, is acting in their interests and will tell them when a question goes beyond their competence. Commissioners and funders who pay for that support are trusting the same things on behalf of the businesses they serve.

Yet business support professionals come from many backgrounds. They include advisers, mentors, coaches, consultants, trainers, accountants, bank staff and people who have run businesses themselves. There is no single route into the work, and the quality of support can vary widely from one service, provider or adviser to the next. Businesses usually cannot judge that quality until after they have used it.

The SFEDI Business Support Standards give the profession a shared description of what good business support looks like. They set out what a business support professional needs to be able to do, and what they need to know and understand to do it well. They are the evolution of the national standards SFEDI developed between 2007 and 2010 and updated in 2013, and they are free to read and use.

This paper explains why a shared standard matters, where the Standards come from, what they contain, the principles behind them, and how each group that relies on business support can use them.

1 Why business support needs a shared standard

Businesses cannot easily judge quality

Most professions that advise the public have a way of showing that practitioners meet an agreed standard. Business support is broad and varied, and much of it is delivered by people whose main qualification is their experience. That experience is valuable, but on its own it does not tell a business owner whether an adviser will diagnose the real problem, give impartial options, keep their information safe or refer them on when they should.

A shared standard turns those expectations into something specific and checkable. It gives business owners and the organisations acting for them a reference point that does not depend on any one provider's own description of its service.

The work is wide, and it keeps changing

A business adviser may work with a sole trader on Monday and a manufacturer on Tuesday, by video in the morning and on a farm in the afternoon. In recent years the job has grown to include AI and digital adoption, net zero, cyber security, data protection, new forms of finance and higher expectations of evidence. Advisers need a framework that describes the core of the job wherever they work, and the specialist practice they can build on top of it.

Commissioners and employers need a common language

Organisations that fund, commission or employ business support each need to describe the competence they expect. Without a shared reference, each one writes its own, and a provider bidding to several commissioners meets several different definitions of the same job. A common standard, with codes that mean the same thing everywhere, lets commissioners specify quality consistently and lets providers show it once.

Public money and public trust

Much business support is publicly funded. Funders need to know that support is delivered competently and impartially, that conflicts of interest are managed, and that claims of impact are honest. Those expectations are easier to set, and to meet, when they are written down in a standard everyone can see.

2 Where the Standards come from

SFEDI has developed standards for business support since 2007.

Year	Standards
2007	Introduction to Enterprise Support, for people new to business support
2008	Business Information, for information and enquiry roles
2010	Business Support, setting out the main functions of a business adviser
2013	SFEDI's standards updated as the national Business and Enterprise Support standards

For nearly two decades these standards underpinned qualifications, recruitment, appraisal, CPD and the contracting of business support. The 2013 standards were due for review in 2016. They are now classed as legacy and will be archived from the UK's National Occupational Standards database on 11 November 2026.[1, 2] National Occupational Standards are now maintained for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while England has moved to its own occupational standards for apprenticeships and technical education.[3, 4]

SFEDI has redeveloped its standards so that the profession has a current benchmark. The SFEDI Business Support Standards were published in October 2026. This edition keeps what has stood the test of practice, removes duplication and dated references, and adds what business support professionals now need. Every Standard records the original SFEDI standards it evolved from, so the line from the 2007 to 2013 standards to today's edition can be traced unit by unit.

3 What the Standards contain

The structure

Part	What it covers
Professional behaviours (B1 to B11)	The behaviours expected in every area of business support, such as integrity, impartiality, knowing the limits of your competence, inclusive practice and continuing development. They apply to every Standard
Core Standards (C1 to C8)	The main functions every business support professional is expected to meet, whatever their role
Specialist Standards (S1 to S27)	Areas of specialist practice that build on the Core Standards
Business Information Standards (I1 to I4)	Information, enquiry and first-point-of-contact roles
Introduction to Business Support Standards (E1 to E5)	People thinking of working in business support, or new to it

The eight Core Standards are:

C1 Build and manage professional client relationships

C2 Diagnose needs and analyse the business

C3 Support action and change

C4 Navigate, refer and broker support

C5 Measure and evidence impact

C6 Apply current business knowledge

C7 Practise ethically and professionally

C8 Develop own practice and networks

The 27 Specialist Standards cover finance and funding, project and programme delivery, AI and digital adoption, mentoring, coaching, training and facilitation, sustainable business and net zero, people and skills, start-up support, growth and international trade, businesses in difficulty, social enterprise, professional services for small businesses, designing and commissioning business support, rural business, the creative industries, resilience, enterprising skills, business model

design, consultative practice, action learning, account management, digital marketing, inclusive engagement with under-represented businesses, brokering specialist support, and working with neurodivergent and disabled clients.

How a Standard is set out

Each Standard follows the format of the original SFEDI standards:

- **Summary:** what the Standard is about and who it applies to
- **What you need to show:** the performance requirements a professional's practice must meet
- **What you need to know and understand:** the knowledge that underpins that practice
- **Evolved from:** the original SFEDI standards it replaces or draws on

For example, C4 Navigate, refer and broker support includes these requirements:

C4.3 Refer or introduce the client to appropriate services, explaining why, and with the client's consent to share their information

C4.4 Stay impartial throughout, leaving the choice of provider, and how to use them, with the client

C4.K3 Referral procedures and eligibility rules, and how to obtain and record consent to share client information

Codes that do not change

Every requirement has its own code. Performance requirements are numbered (for example C4.3) and knowledge requirements carry a K (for example C4.K3). Codes are permanent. They are never renumbered or reused, and new requirements take the next number. This means a job description, a training programme, a contract or a piece of evidence mapped to a code today will still point to the same requirement in future editions.

Free and open

The Standards are free to read, download and use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives licence (CC BY-ND 4.0). Anyone using them should credit SFEDI. Altered versions may not be published, so the Standards mean the same thing wherever they are used.

4 The principles behind the Standards

Several principles run through the Standards. They explain what sets good business support apart.

The client's interests come first. The first professional behaviour (B1) is to put the client's interests first and act with honesty, integrity and impartiality. The Standards return to this wherever it is tested, including when programme targets or an organisation's own services pull the other way (C7.2, S2.9, S22.8).

Clients become more capable, not more dependent. Good support builds the client's own ability to analyse their business, act and find help for themselves (C2.11, C3.9, C4.6).

Knowing your limits is a strength. Professionals are expected to recognise when a question goes beyond their competence, or into regulated advice such as financial, legal or insolvency advice, and to refer the client to someone qualified (B9, C6.5, C7.4).

Practice, not just knowledge. Performance requirements describe what a professional does in real client work. Knowing about diagnosis is not the same as diagnosing well, and the Standards keep the two apart.

Impact is evidenced honestly. Professionals agree with clients what success looks like, record outcomes accurately, and understand the limits of what can be claimed, including attribution and additionality (C5).

Support works for everyone who could benefit. Fair, inclusive practice and reasonable adjustments are part of the core of the job (B10, C1.14, C7.5). S24 covers reaching under-represented business owners in depth, and S26 and S27 cover adapting support to work well for neurodivergent and disabled clients.

Technology is used responsibly. Professionals use digital and AI tools in their own practice, check what they produce, protect client information and are open with clients about how they use them (C7.7).

The Standards stay current. Named schemes, thresholds and funding programmes date quickly, so they are kept out of the Standards. The Standards describe the capability to keep up with them instead (for example C4.K1 and C6.K4).

5 How the Standards are used

Business support professionals

- Assess your practice against the Core Standards and the Specialist Standards that match your work
- Plan and record CPD against specific codes, so you can show what each activity developed
- Show clients and employers what you can do, through qualifications and, when it launches, Specialist Certification
- Use the Introduction to Business Support Standards to plan a move into business support

Employers and managers of business support teams

- Write job descriptions and person specifications from the Core Standards, adding the Specialist Standards each role needs
- Structure induction, supervision and appraisal around the Standards and the professional behaviours
- Identify team development needs, and choose training mapped to the codes that matter
- Use the Business Information Standards for helpline, enquiry and navigator roles

Commissioners and funders

This includes government departments, combined and local authorities, devolved governments, Growth Hubs, innovation agencies, banks, corporate programmes and charitable funders.

- Specify in tenders and grant agreements the Standards that advisers delivering the service must meet, and how providers will show it
- Choose the Specialist Standards that match the purpose of the programme
- Use S14 Designing and Commissioning Business Support as a framework for the people who design and manage programmes
- Use S25 Brokering Specialist Support for programmes that broker or fund specialist help for businesses
- Use C5 to agree how outcomes and impact will be recorded and reported

An example of specification wording:

> "Advisers delivering this service will meet the Core Standards of the SFEDI Business Support Standards (C1 to C8) and, for the growth strand, S10 Growth, Productivity and International Trade. Providers will show how each adviser meets these Standards, through a qualification, Specialist Certification or a Recognised Programme."

Training providers, universities and professional bodies

- Map workshops, CPD and programmes to the Standards' codes, so learners and employers can see exactly what each one covers
- Apply to SFEDI to have programmes recognised, so learners who complete them receive Specialist Certification
- Use the Standards to show that a programme reflects current practice
- Professional bodies and networks serving small businesses, such as accountants, lenders and mentoring networks, can use S13 Professional Services for Small Businesses and S4 Enterprise Mentoring to describe good practice for their members

6 How SFEDI recognises professionals

SFEDI sets the Standards and recognises the professionals who meet them.

- **Qualifications** are the proof that a professional meets the Standards. The SFEDI Awards Level 5 and Level 7 qualifications cover the main functions of a business adviser. Existing holders of the previous SFEDI Awards Level 5 and Level 7 qualifications in Professional Business and Enterprise Support Services continue to meet the Core Standards.
- **Specialist Certification** (coming soon) will recognise specialist practice. Each of the 27 Specialist Standards has one matching certification, gained through recognised programmes, CPD or workshops.

- **Recognised Programmes** (coming soon) are workshops and programmes that providers have mapped to the Standards and SFEDI has recognised. Learners who complete them will receive Specialist Certification for the Standard the programme is mapped to.

7 Keeping the Standards current

SFEDI keeps the Standards under review. New Standards and requirements are added with new codes, so anything already mapped to the Standards stays valid. Eight Specialist Standards (S20 to S27) have been added since the Standards were first drafted. They reflect the consultative, facilitation, account management, outreach and brokering skills that business support programmes ask for, and the depth of practice needed to work well with neurodivergent and disabled clients.

SFEDI welcomes proposals for new Specialist Standards from sectors, places and organisations that need one.

Sources

1. UK Standards, NOS Governance Group position statement on legacy NOS. ukstandards.org.uk/media/fj4ilomc/position-statement-legacy-nos-2025.pdf
2. UK Standards, NOS archiving activity, 11 August 2026. ukstandards.org.uk/en/news/documents/nos-archiving-activity
3. UK Standards, NOS Strategy 2022 and beyond. ukstandards.org.uk/media/y1qlgama/nos-strategy-2022-and-beyond.pdf
4. Commission for Employment and Skills, written statement, 21 July 2016. parallelparliament.co.uk

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About SFEDI

SFEDI developed national standards for business support between 2007 and 2010 and updated them in 2013. It now sets the SFEDI Business Support Standards and recognises the professionals who meet them, through qualifications, Specialist Certification and Recognised Programmes.

Read and browse the Standards at sfedi.co.uk/standards.

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