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The number of start-up firms receiving support from the Scottish Government's Business Gateway scheme has dropped to an eight-year low.

New figures have revealed that 8746 new businesses received help from the organisation last year, a 15 per cent drop from 2009.

The total sums invested also fell to their lowest, with the £12.6 million spent in 2016/17 around £1 million less than eight years ago.

Business Gateway describes itself as "publicly funded service contributing to the economic well-being of Scotland by providing access to free business support services".

Statistics obtained by the Scottish Conservatives also revealed the birth and date rate of businesses north of the border is worse than the UK average.

According to ONS figures, Scotland's business birth rate of 12.5 per cent is worse than every English region, and only marginally better than Wales and Northern Ireland.

Shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said the data exposed the SNP's anti-business agenda, warning the overall situation could get worse still after it hiked income tax in the budget.

Derek Mackay, the finance secretary, made that decision against the advice of a range of business organisations, who said it would damage the economy and place firms here at a competitive disadvantage.

Scottish Conservative shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said:

"Business Gateway provides essential support to many start-up businesses right across the country.

"These are the firms we hope will create jobs, boost growth and create a stronger economy overall for Scotland.

"So it's extremely concerning to learn fewer have been using the free support of Business Gateway, and it's yet another indication of the cost of having an anti-business SNP government.

“If you take these findings along with the fact more Scottish businesses are dying, while fewer are being created, it paints a grim picture.

“But instead of seeking to improve this situation in the budget, Derek Mackay went against the wishes of the business community, and hiked taxes for hundreds of thousands of Scots.”