



## CABINET

Tuesday 7 July 2020

## SMART TOWNS PROJECT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report presents the East Suffolk Smart Towns Project, it details the background and describes how this project supports the Strategic Plan outcomes through supporting 11 market towns with technical interventions such as free WiFi networks, footfall tracking and digital platforms. In parallel with this technology roll out, the project will also establish the Springboard Programme which will enable local businesses to maximise the benefits of the digital economy, tools and infrastructure to adapt and meet new challenges. This will also include Digital First Aid, a package of digital interventions aimed at supporting businesses adapt to changing business conditions caused by Covid19. The original project scope and budget of £400k has been revised to include all market towns and expand the digital support offer. Having successfully secured £200k of external funding, approval is now sought to fund a further £500k from the Transformation Reserve and commence project implementation.

Is the report Open or Exempt?	Open
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Stephen Burroughes Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services & Operational Partnerships
<b>Supporting Officer:</b>	Ann Carey Head of ICT Tel 01502 523215 Email <a href="mailto:ann.carey@eastsoffolk.gov.uk">ann.carey@eastsoffolk.gov.uk</a>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The East Suffolk Smart Towns Project aims to strengthen the economic vitality and community cohesiveness of all our market towns through the installation of digital town technology such as free to use WiFi, footfall tracking sensors, analytics and retail apps. This new digital infrastructure will be combined with a data driven programme of business support: creating a business ecosystem to develop effective digital interventions to support business sustainability and growth across East Suffolk and creating an enhanced sense of digital placemaking in all our market towns.

## 2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The SCDC Enabling Broadband Programme worked with Framlingham Town Council to commission a pilot of free town centre wifi. The scope of the pilot included the design and provision of a 'free to use' public wireless network as well as the establishment of a digital platform to enable digital marketing, monitoring trends of new and repeat visitors, reporting of footfall traffic, etc. The Pilot Team worked closely with the business community to develop social media marketing and supported small traders to implement cashless payment systems. After only 10 months the pilot is already reporting benefits with positive feedback from local businesses, residents and visitors. Decisions on interventions and improvements can now be made based on access to qualitative data rather than anecdotal evidence.
- 2.2 In 2019 East Suffolk Council commissioned The People and Places Partnership to identify the issues and challenges being faced by East Suffolk's town centres. The project entailed data gathering and surveys in all 12 towns (Aldeburgh, Beccles, Bungay, Felixstowe, Framlingham, Halesworth, Leiston, Lowestoft, Saxmundham, Wickham Market, Woodbridge and Southwold) from both town centre traders and user. This information is being used to inform the development of town actions plans and forms part of the Council's town centre revitalisation programme. One of the key findings from this research was that many towns have poor digital presence with low numbers of local businesses connecting and promoting their online offer. There is significant research which demonstrates how the smarter use of technology and digital transformation can provide an opportunity to secure the economic sustainability of high streets and town centres. The People and Places survey demonstrated a strong appetite from the towns to embrace this investment and how it could transform the town centre offer.

## 3 SMART TOWNS PROJECT

- 3.1 The Smart Towns Project was therefore established to address this need and ensure businesses can benefit fully from the potential of digital enabling technologies. It consists of two key elements:
- **The Town Tech Rollout:** this consists of installing footfall tracking and data capture technology and free town Wi-Fi networks into all 11 towns (free Wi-Fi and footfall infrastructure has already been installed in Framlingham as part of the existing pilot project). Town digital platforms will be formed to enable the Town Council and business associations to access and report on the data as well as use it for promotion and marketing. Accompanying the installation will be a town support package to encourage best use of new technology and encourage next steps to positive digital interventions and learning.

- **The Digital ‘Springboard’:** this consists of the set up and delivery of an accompanying branded business support initiative that aims to deliver bespoke technology solutions according to business need. This will operate as a procured ‘business ecosystem’, developing creative digital interventions, digital upskilling and a responsive business support network. It would be available to all businesses across East Suffolk district not just those within the market towns. **Please note** ‘Springboard’ is a working title, and the programme will be officially branded upon procurement.

3.2 As this Smart Towns project meets many of the ambitions set out in the Economic Strategy for Norfolk & Suffolk, then an application was made to the LEP Innovative Projects Bid. This was judged first out of over 90 other applications and an award of £200k was given in April 2020 demonstrating external endorsement of our proposals.

#### 4 TOWN TECH ROLL-OUT

- 4.1 A key emphasis of the Town Tech Roll-out is that it is to be locally led and owned. Key lessons learnt from the Framlingham pilot is that a “ground up” approach involving the business community and the town is critical to the success of such a project and its ongoing sustainability. Enabling local people and organisations to be an integral part of what happens in their town cannot be over emphasised. Having all 12 towns produce consistent data through footfall technology will be truly ground - breaking as we will have the ability to compare data and the success of initiatives in one town with another: learn, replicate and evidence. We will be able to assess which interventions, support initiatives and strategies work and which do not. This in turn will help focus our resources in the right areas and replicate successful tech initiatives across the East Suffolk geography.
- 4.2 “Hard”, tangible tech infrastructure will serve as an anchor for future tech initiatives in the town and is a visible signifier of investment going into a town. Data gathered locally by the footfall tracking infrastructure will inform local understanding on such as footfall, dwell time, location analysis, movement trends, repeat visits, the impact of events, initiatives and promotions. The data generated in each town, coupled with analytics will enable us to shape the nature the Council’s Towns Revitalisation Programme and interventions so that we are operating in a focussed, evidence-based manner.
- 4.3 The interventions arising from the new town data will create a programme that creates a set of distinct narratives for residents and visitors alike. One aim will be to acknowledge the strengths and distinctive offers of each town into coherent offer that would encourage greater visits, stay-times and spend from locals as much as visitors. Training and support will be delivered to town councils, local businesses and other local stakeholder groups such as Business Associations. This will introduce users to the Town Platform where footfall and Wi-Fi data is collected.
- 4.4 Accompanying the Town Tech Rollout, town stakeholder groups will receive creative and social media training to optimise digital presence and develop East Suffolk wide digital place making through effective and attractive town web presence. The Town Councils will own the data from the footfall tracking infrastructure/town Wi-Fi allowing them to examine further tech-based solutions, promotional opportunities and affect decisions related to local town events and the impacts on the towns/businesses.

## **5 THE 'DIGITAL SPRINGBOARD'**

- 5.1 Whilst the Town digital Roll-Out is an investment in digital infrastructure and local participation in our towns, it is critical to have a complementary programme of “skilling up” businesses and local stakeholders to take advantage of the new digital infrastructure, awareness and opportunity – the ‘Digital Springboard’. To compliment the Town Tech Roll-out we will procure a new, branded and promoted business digital growth programme, the ‘Digital Springboard’, to digitally upskill and transform businesses.
- 5.2 The businesses of East Suffolk towns need to become adaptable and flexible in this ever-changing digital world and learn the skills to take advantage of new digital developments and the opportunities these bring. The new climate of COVID-19 has added to the relevance and importance of this project.
- 5.3 The Digital Springboard will be delivered via a contracted company with relevant local digital networks, excellent social media reach and a proven practice of working with partners and smaller businesses. It will deliver a range of services including:
- Online Digital Health Check to assess businesses online presence and provide a basic diagnostic to help with strategic business planning, digital marketing and guidance on digital technologies.
  - Digital Presence Checks on all 12 towns.
  - Launch Springboard as a brand and start outreach to businesses with a curated offer of online support.
  - Identify businesses looking for specific digital upskilling.
  - Create business support network encompassing a broad base of skills (e.g. analytics, software development, digital HR, app development) to strengthen the local supply chain and create further B2B opportunities for micros/SMEs and the digital sector.
  - Programme of digital skills training, masterclasses and learning events.
- 5.4 The Digital Springboard is a pilot programme and will use feedback and evidence from the wider business community to constantly inform the development of the interventions to ensure that they remain relevant and effective.

## **6 DATA ANALYTICS**

- 6.1 In order to maximise the impact of Smart Towns Project and to identify and optimise next steps for wider economic strategy and business recovery, the Smart Towns Project will work with SODA (Suffolk Office of Data Analytics), expert data analysts from the Springboard Network and our own East Suffolk team (which includes analytical support) to deliver data insight KPIs and crucial insights on our town centres to drive local and regional project development.

## **7 IMPACT OF COVID 19**

- 7.1 The disruption and economic impact created by Covid-19 and the accompanying suspension of a full spectrum of business and commerce, especially in town centres, is unprecedented. Many East Suffolk companies are struggling to adapt and survive, and the immediate economic impact highlights issues of business sustainability and digital readiness. Many companies have implemented an emergency digital switch, whether a move to online sales, or increasing their reach on social media, to even internal business transformation necessitated by home working. Many businesses are making their first steps to become digitally visible however, they will require support to make the most effective adaptations,

and to start implementing longer term digital strategy beyond the emergency response. Many more will need to adapt or improve their skills to create a long term, truly effective shift.

- 7.2 The project plans have been reviewed and adjusted to include a Digital First Aid package to ensure that it can deliver this essential business support function of the Springboard programme as early as possible as this is considered to be a vital part of East Suffolk's Covid-19 response; supporting business recovery, resilience and wider digital placemaking. Whilst some elements of the project may be delayed, for instance the installation of WiFi and footfall trackers due to town centre closures and emergency health and safety measures such as social distancing, work can commence on the procurement process to ensure contracts are in place and detail work plans agreed with suppliers.

## **8 COMMUNITY PROJECTS**

- 8.1 We are aware that there will be a need to develop a community element to the East Suffolk Smart Towns Project and there are ambitions to grow this element of the programme. We are confident that the network of digital expertise developed by the Springboard will also be able to contribute to digital community projects tackling digital isolation, community digital upskilling and local education projects. The East Suffolk Smart Town project team is also working on a social care pilot with BT, which examines uses of technology in care homes and assisted living arrangements.

## **9 HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO THE EAST SUFFOLK BUSINESS PLAN?**

- 9.1 East Suffolk Smart Towns Project directly supports the achievement of two of the five Strategic Plan themes – Delivering Digital Transformation ('skills & training' and 'district wide digital infrastructure') and Growing Our Economy ('attract and stimulate inward investment' and 'business partnerships').

## **10 FINANCIAL AND GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The total cost of the project over the two years is assessed at £900k, this covers the Town Tech roll out to all 11 market town as well as the establishment of the Digital Springboard service and its first two years of operation. In March 2020, East Suffolk Council made a successful application for funding of £200k from the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to support the implementation of the East Suffolk Smart Towns Project. A commitment of £200k funded from the New Homes Bonus Reserve was included within the approved 2020/21 council budget and it is proposed that the remaining £500k be funded from the Transformation Reserve.
- 10.2 The project will fund a minimum of the first two years' operational costs and will work closely with the Town Councils over this time to identify and develop future funding options which can be based on the economic benefits being achieved from the scheme.
- 10.3 The scope of the project includes exploration of other external funding opportunities for digital innovation, where successful these could expand the project deliverables with targeted actions on issues such as driving commercial growth or tackling societal challenges.

## **11 PROJECT PLAN**

- 11.1 The Project is scheduled to commence in summer 2020 and complete by summer 2022. The actual order of towns for the town tech roll out will be agreed once discussions have commenced with each Town Council as there are a number of pre-requisites which will need to be in place, e.g. Town Council approval and agreement on the organisation required to support the implementation, consultation with local business community and results from technical surveys. The People & Places research work has identified 'digital readiness' for each town and this will be used as the basis for the initial discussions with Town Councils and business associations.
- 11.2 As both the business environment and digital technology will change and evolve over the course of the project, then we need to adopt an agile and flexible approach to its delivery. Also, given that we will be one of the first local authorities to implement such a project and therefore likely to attract significant attention, we need to be able to take advantage of opportunities that may arise during the project for collaboration with other agencies, suppliers or academia and be prepared to adjust project plans as needed to ensure the outcomes are achieved.

## **12 RESOURCES**

- 12.1 The implementation of the Smart Towns Project will require extensive project management and funding for a dedicated Project Manager post has been included within wider project costs as well as funding for specialist consultancy support as required.

## **13 GOVERNANCE**

- 13.1 The project will adopt corporate project management standards and will be controlled by a Project Management Board. Due to the high profile nature of the project it is proposed that there is Member representation on this Board. Strategic Director Nick Khan will act as Project Director supported by Paul Wood, Head of Economic Development, to ensure alignment and co-ordination with wider towns and business development programmes. This is particularly important for the development of Town Action Plans with Town Councils where this project will be providing the digital elements. The project will report into the Strategic Plan Delivery Board with regular updates on achievement of project outcomes. The project will maintain an up to date risk register with clear resolution, mitigation or escalation of all identified risks. All contracts will be subject to corporate legal and procurement standards.

## **14 PERFORMANCE**

- 14.1 A schedule of expected benefits and outcomes has been agreed as part of the LEP funding application and these have been built into the project deliverables, the achievement of these will be closely monitored and reported.

## **15 PROCUREMENT**

- 15.1 To procure the companies and products required for the Town Tech Rollout and the Digital Springboard, the project will develop an innovative Digital Procurement Framework. This will have the advantage that it can be used subsequently by other local authorities across the LEP area and for further East Suffolk Council digital projects.

## **16 OTHER KEY ISSUES**

- 16.1 This report has been prepared having taken into account the results of an Equality Impact Assessment.

## **17 CONSULTATION**

- 17.1 The project has been informed by extensive consultation with local stakeholders including town councils and business associations as well as public sector organisations such as Suffolk County Council, New Anglia Market Town Working Group and New Anglia LEP. *(awaiting quote from LEP)* There is strong support for initiatives which enable businesses and market towns to benefit from the potential of digital technologies.

## **18 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 18.1 Whilst there are other business support programmes available, they are not specifically focused on digital business support. It would be difficult to achieve the level of engagement and transformation expected without a dedicated programme such as the one that the Smart Towns Project would deliver.
- 18.2 The individual market towns could implement their own public wifi schemes but this approach would not realise the benefits of a planned, co-ordinated roll out e.g. economies of scale, consistent approach to data collection and reporting, encourage collaboration between towns through sharing of skills & experience, ability to compare data and the success of initiatives in one town with another.
- 18.3 A do-nothing option would not address the longer term economic sustainability of our market towns, nor would it support the Covid19 business recovery plans.

## **19 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 19.1 The East Suffolk Smart Towns Project will accelerate digital readiness for our market towns and businesses ensuring that they are best supported to achieve economic resilience and sustainability.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. That approval is given to fund up to £500k from the Transformation Reserve, depending on outcome of other external funding plans, and to commence work on the implementation of the East Suffolk Smart Towns Project.
2. That delegated authority is given to the Strategic Director, in consultation with the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services and Operational Partnerships, to award contracts, expend the budget to deliver the project and investigate additional external funding sources which could replace or supplement existing internal funding.

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Available From</b>
21 May 2020	Equalities Impact Assessment – ref EQIA209448066	Ann Carey Head of ICT