

To:	Kim Tanner, Cabinet Member for Finance and Housing
From:	Jeremy Whittaker, Strategic Economic Regeneration Manager
Director:	Julie Beilby, Chief Executive

BRIEFING NOTE: EXECUTIVE - NON-KEY DECISION

BUSINESS RATES RETENTION PILOT PROGRAMME – DIGITAL INCLUSION PROJECT

Summary of Issue:

This report provides some background on the Business Rates Retention Pilot Programme and seeks approval for proposals set out in the report relating to the use of funding allocated towards supporting measures to tackle digital exclusion.

Recommendation:

That the report **BE NOTED**.

That the proposals for the delivery of a Digital Inclusion Project, as set out in Appendix 1, **BE AGREED**.

1 Background

- 1.1 Having been approved by both Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council and Kent County Council in 2021, good progress has been made on the economic initiatives in the Business Rates Retention Pilot Programme, with just under two-thirds (65%) of the programme having been delivered.
- 1.2 Some of the highlights from this programme include:
 - Town Centre Regeneration Funding to deliver the initial phases of the Tonbridge Town Centre Review.
 - The successful delivery of two rounds of the Shopfront Improvement scheme (with another round currently underway).
 - The establishment of an apprenticeship/internship scheme with Oaks Specialist College which launched in September 2023.
 - Funding for Jobs Fairs and Business Networking events.
- 1.3 However, this report specifically addresses the last project to be implemented in the programme, which is focussed on supporting the digital inclusion of local residents.

2 Digital Inclusion

- 2.1 In December 2021, the Borough Council agreed to be involved in a Community Wi-Fi Pilot Project focussed on working with the most digitally disadvantaged areas of Kent to improve access to Wi-Fi using the KPSN (Kent Public Services Network). The Borough Council agreed with KCC to undertake feasibility studies to ascertain the potential to improve digital access in our areas of greatest digital exclusion - South Aylesford and Trench - with the Business Rates Retention Pilot allocation (£75,000) potentially being used to cover the ongoing maintenance of the equipment.
- 2.2 However, the feasibility report provided by Kent County Council at the end of 2022 ultimately included prohibitive installation and ongoing maintenance costs for both South Aylesford and Trench, even when looking at relatively small areas. This was in no small part to the large increase in equipment costs in recent years, but also due to some of the unique challenges presented by both areas. With Kent County Council unable to cover the installation costs, and our allocation not covering anywhere near the life-time maintenance of the equipment, this initiative was aborted.
- 2.3 Since this time, the Borough Council has been working with the Digital Kent team to look at alternative ways of supporting digital inclusion agenda with the funding that has been allocated through the Business Rates Retention Pilot Programme. **Appendix 1** sets out a Business Justification Case for an initiative that supports digitally excluded residents from across Tonbridge and Malling Borough with hardware and skills development, with a key focus on residents seeking employment or at risk of financial hardship and/or becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).
- 2.4 Whilst the main aim of the project is to support 225 local residents in gaining greater digital access to employment/training opportunities and services through the provision of hardware and skills development training, it should also be noted that this proposed project also supports the vision and priorities set out in the Digital and IT Strategy 2023-2027:

“To become a ‘Cognitive Council’ where the communities and businesses we serve can interact with TMBC online instantly and securely 24/7 for the majority of our statutory services”.

Essentially through the support provided by this proposed project, a greater number of our residents will be able to interact with the Borough Council online rather than using other means of communication, and therefore have greater access to services. This will be true not only in accessing council services, but a range of other provision across a wide range of organisations as well.

3 Legal Advice

- 3.1 The matters set out in this briefing note are considered routine or uncontroversial and a legal opinion has not been sought.

4 Financial and Value for Money implications

- 4.1 As set out in section 2, £75,000 funding has been allocated towards this Digital Inclusion Project. There is no requirement for the borough council to provide any match-funding for these particular initiatives.

5 Risk Assessment

- 5.1 The risks associated with this project are set out in section 2.2.3 of Appendix 1.

6 Public Sector Equality Duty

- 6.1 In commissioning these initiatives, the council will ensure that they have due regard to the need to achieve the objectives set out under s149 of the Equality Act 2021.

7 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny

- 7.1 We do not consider that this matter needs to be considered by O&S/SSC before a decision is made.
- 7.2 It is not a key decision as the spend is less than £100,000 and the effects on communities living or working in the area are unlikely to be significant. The funding for the scheme is part of the Business Rates Retention Pilot Programme, the submission of which was approved by TMBC Cabinet in January 2021 and endorsed by Kent County Council Cabinet in June 2021. The decision does not cut across 2 or more portfolios nor does it propose a new or amended strategy. We are therefore of the view that this decision can be taken by the Cabinet Member.

8 Communications

- 8.1 It will be important to ensure that efforts are made to ensure there is a good level of awareness about this digital inclusion initiative through social media channels and our website.

9 Conclusion

- 9.1 This programme represents an opportunity to provide additional support to local residents, and it is therefore requested of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Housing to support the recommendations highlighted above.

10 Appendices

- 10.1 Appendix 1 – Digital Inclusion Support – Business Justification Case