

<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>Development of Online Platform to accompany Council's Business Listings function</b>
<b>Committee Report Submitted To:</b>	<b>The Leisure and Development Committee</b>
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>16<sup>th</sup> June 2020</b>
<b>For Decision or For Information</b>	<b>For Information</b>

<b>Linkage to Council Strategy (2019-23)</b>	
Strategic Theme	Innovation & Transformation
Outcome	The Council will embrace new technologies and processes where they can bring about better experiences for citizens and visitors.
Lead Officer	Business Development Manager

<b>Budgetary Considerations</b>	
Cost of Proposal	Not applicable
Included in Current Year Estimates	Not applicable
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	Not applicable
Staffing Costs	Yes

<b>Screening Requirements</b>	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	No	Date
	EQIA Required and Completed:	No	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	No	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed	No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	No	Date:

## **1.0 Purpose of Report**

**The purpose of this report is to provide Members with information on the potential provision of an online trading platform.**

## **2.0 Background**

The current COVID-19 lockdown has had a significant impact on the ability for local businesses in the Causeway Coast & Glens region to trade, much like the rest of the UK. Social distancing and the lockdown restrictions have forced businesses with an existing e-commerce presence to fall back on a remote trading strategy, and for others without existing infrastructure, has created an impassable barrier to trade.

The impact of the economic shock of a major crisis for public health is now being felt in terms of the effect on town centres, small businesses, longer terms plans for regeneration, and tourism. Based on a local survey which yielded 140 responses:

64% noted a drop in revenue greater than 80% - 70% indicating that they had cash flow problems. Only 7% had remained open for business, with 75% stopping trading temporarily, and 18% continuing to trade online.

Of the five key messages coming back from local businesses, two were:

- Help with online activities and creating ecommerce plans.
- Promotion of a Support Local Message.

Businesses were asked what adaptations they have employed due to the crisis and the comments have noted that local businesses have tried where possible to continue to trade. Of the 116 responses received the most popular changes that have been made are as follows:

- Switch to online trading or increase in effort to online trading. [22%].
- Deliveries direct to customers [20%].
- Suspended trading completely [11%].
- Adaptations made to property/or production lines to comply with social distancing [8%].

Other adaptations which were mentioned included:

- Staff working from home.
- Created new product lines for customers.
- Research on new markets for current products.

In terms of additional business supports requested, key themes included:

- Online activities – websites, social media, ecommerce, SEO, online marketing.
- Use of PPE for staff.
- Staff training in handling difficult situations – e.g. non-compliance with new regulations.
- Guidance on adaptations needed within premises to comply with the new social distancing requirements.

## **3.0 Provision of an online trading platform**

Whilst some larger businesses have the expertise and financial capacity to develop and advertise effective E-Commerce trading platforms, the majority of the Borough's SMEs are not in a position to invest in a sophisticated online presence, in order to operate in their sector trading environment as the economy emerges from the Covid-19 Pandemic and then in the 'new-normal'.

As part of its current suite of assistance for local business, Council is providing the Digital Causeway Programme. This programme helps small SMEs to develop their own online presence from social media training up to implementation of a trading website. Council is also

supporting the Taste Causeway programme, which includes a “Buy and Book” hub for those attached to the local food industry.

However, in order to remove barriers to trade for other businesses, and in conjunction with its existing programme of assistance to local businesses, Council seeks to establish an E-Commerce Platform which is accessible and usable for all the Borough’s businesses.

In the current economic circumstances that have been caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is possible that an online trading platform for local small businesses could provide a lifeline that enables those businesses to survive, in addition to other local projects, such as Council’s own Digital Causeway Programme, and its ongoing support for Taste Causeway.

Trading online via e-commerce enables sales to be achieved that otherwise could not happen, particularly in the current circumstances. Many micro and small businesses have not yet embraced the opportunity of e-commerce for a number of reasons, such as cost and fear of technology. A trading platform could enable many local businesses to get online. The platform will also encourage consumers to buy local.

#### **4.0 Potential Provision**

Council has been approached by a potential provider of such a platform. To manage a first stage of procurement, officers have devised a first stage “expression of interest” to allow Council to explore the market.

Based on the offer from the potential provider, this expression of interest is released on the basis that any provision is made at no cost to Council.

Depending on the level of response from the market, officers will then further explore taking this concept further. Should Council receive more than one expression of interest, it will then move to a second, formal stage of tender.

Some of the requirements in the expression of interest include:

- Provision of the platform at no cost to Council.
- Provision by Council of assistance with word of mouth or other promotions.
- Ability to handle large numbers of transactions, adequate transaction security, help desk and call desk response capability.
- Monitoring of items for sale.
- Compatibility with other Council programmes, such as Digital Causeway, Naturally North Coast and Taste Causeway, either run or supported by Council.

#### **5.0 Outcome**

Officers will report to Council on the outcome of the expression of interest stage, and any subsequent tender or acceptance that may be required.