

Policy and Finance Committee

Date: 16 November 2020

Purpose of the Report: Digital high street web portal for independent businesses.

Contact Officer: Vivien Cannon, Head of Cultural and Economic Services

Corporate Objective/s	Vibrancy and Vitality of Town and Town Centre - To continue to support a vibrant town through partnership working and initiatives including management of the street market, support for local businesses, town and community promotions and town centre enhancements.	
Implications:		
Financial	yes	Utilising Cultural & Economic Services earmarked reserves (970/9026)
Human Resources		
Operational/Service delivery		
Procedural/Legal	yes	As per Committee Ref. 56/CE
Risk/Health and Safety		

1. RECOMMENDATION

Should members be minded, the recommendation is:

- 1.1 To release £5,000 from earmarked reserves (970/9026) to LB First to fund the setting up of a digital high street web portal for independent businesses in the Town.**

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At its meeting on 07/09/20, Cultural and Economic Services (C&E) received a presentation from the Chair of LB First, requesting funding towards establishing a "Digital High Street" web portal for independent businesses - local shops/retailers in the Town Centre and beyond, e.g. Linslade. The aim being to establish an online 'shop front' for these businesses; promotion and a search functionality to help customers locate them. One that serves as a one stop shop web address for customers to locate and effectively communicate with their local retailers with the site providing access 24/7 for information. LB First believes the scheme is well matched to the corporate objective of C&E in supporting the 'Vibrancy and Vitality of the Town and Town Centre'.

- 2.2 LB First, a not for profit organisation would be the host and manager of the platform. They lead the purchasing and as a guiding principle, seek to ensure the provider is local to the Town. This approach responds to the movement towards a digitally enabled town centre. It supports all sized businesses to address the need to operate on all digital platforms as well as continue to operate in their physical premises. Consumers now enjoy and expect multiple channel communications and purchasing from businesses. The portal will link to businesses' own web sites, etc. as well as provide a web site for those not yet digitally enabled. LB First has undertaken research and has assessed that similar schemes are achieving success elsewhere, e.g. Princess Risborough.
- 2.3 The total funding requested was £5,500 to provide a portal with the potential of e-commerce functionality and to be operational as soon as possible. C&E Committee fully supported the concept of the proposal and wanted to see further evidence of detailed scoping work to determine the level of interest from independent businesses. To assist with this work, initial funding of £1,000 was released to LB First which included additional funds of £500 to assist with the scoping exercise. Additional funding of up to £5,000 would be considered by Committee upon receipt of the more detailed scoping report and breakdown of the project.
- 2.4 Given the current Covid situation and a second lockdown, this has placed pressure on local businesses to maintain their ability to serve customers. C&E Committee agreed that the above requested information would be presented to the soonest appropriate meeting to facilitate an expedient decision on releasing the remaining funds; either an extraordinary meeting of C&E or Policy and Finance Committee.

3. INFORMATION

- 3.1 LB First has submitted a detailed breakdown of costs for setting up of the portal, **attached** at Appendix A.
- 3.2 LB First received quotes and seek to accept that which is shown in Appendix A, because it offered options regarding the scale of website functionality thus allowing flexibility of choice depending on what funds are available. It demonstrates growth opportunities and the necessary functionality to achieve them. The quote provides value for money and the provider is local to Leighton-Linslade. The options chosen from the attached quote are 2, 3 and 4 which enabled LB First to identify the amount of funding requested to achieve Phase 1.
- 3.3 Phase 2, is to expand activity and set up a delivery system for the Town and discussions are already underway with a local business and Central Bedfordshire Council to achieve this, pending confirmation of Committee's endorsement to fund Phase 1. LB First believe that the scheme in its entirety will support the Town to be one of the most innovative in Bedfordshire demonstrating productive collaboration between businesses and the local authorities.

3.4 LB First has submitted information on the level of businesses expressing their support, and those who intend take up for the proposed portal opportunity, **attached** at Appendix B.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 We have now entered a second national lockdown phase which further demonstrates the need for retailers and businesses to utilise multiple platforms for sales and reaching customers. Importantly for customers, to be able to access information on their local retailers in an easy one stop shop format, further supports their ability to shop locally.

4.2 The information provided by LB First is a detailed budget for the creation of the portal and the functionality options. This will assist Committee in its understanding of how LB First reached the total amount of funding being requested.

4.3 A healthy 95.2% of independent businesses engaged with have expressed their support and intention to sign up to the new portal.

4.4 LB First is a not for profit organisation which will take on responsibility purchase, host and manage the portal including annual costs.

4.5 Having a digitally enabled High Street (or retail / service sector) is essential in enabling our Town Centre and surrounding retail businesses to flourish in today's consumer led world. There is no longer a one dimensional way of doing business and our business community could be enabled to reach out beyond the boundary of the Town Centre via a digital platform, whilst continuing to provide the local physical experience of visiting the Town.

End.