

**EXPRESSION OF INTEREST**

**FOR AN ONLINE TRADING PLATFORM**

**21st May 2020**

General 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 Borough’s Economy

“This is primarily a humanitarian crisis, and the economic shock is a second order impact. However, the focus is now moving towards how society emerges from the crisis and supports the economy in the recovery stages;

“The 2020 recession is estimated to reduce output by c7.5% (Danske bank published 28 April 2020), 6.7% to 10% (EY), c9.6% (UUEPC). It took a number of years for the 2008 recession to fully unfold and these initial impacts are already more severe.

“The most vulnerable groups in society are likely to bear most of the impact and as a result require more support in the recovery stage. The young, those in precarious employment, with low levels of formal qualification, those who can’t work from home or are not technologically adept are more likely to be impacted most.

“In terms of a sectoral perspective, those in the sectors that pay the lowest average wage are most likely to have lost their job or been furloughed (retail & hospitality). Manufacturing and construction are also impacted significantly.

“The sub-regions of NI that have a strong manufacturing, construction and/or tourism base are likely to be impacted most – Mid-Ulster, Mid & East Antrim & Causeway Coast and Glens are the three most impacted according to the Centre for Progressive Policy.”

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. Only7% 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.

At time of writing, Council is also conducting a survey of town centre users, and early indications show that there are concerns around the accessibility and safety of shared town spaces, car parking, social distancing in shops and public transport use.

A Borough E-Commerce 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’.

Requirement

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, providing the following functionality:

General Essential Functionality:

* User friendly, meeting WC3 accessibility standards.
* Compliance with UK / WWW Industry Standards.
* Compatible with all devices and browsers.
* Incorporate the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Branding.

Business Essential Functionality:

* Establish a unique online presence.
* Advertise products / services.
* Facilitate an order / purchase.
* Receive payment.
* Coordinate and track orders (if relevant).

Desirable Functionality:

* The platform must support multi languages.
* Include app technology (Google play / Apple store).

Council has also established an Open for Business platform – an online database and public point of reference. This database and Council’s established links to the Borough’s businesses will provide the business user base for the E-Commerce platform.

Expression of Interest

Rationale

In the current economic circumstances that have been caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council believes that an online trading platform for local small businesses could provide a lifeline that enables those businesses to survive.

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.

Council believes that a trading platform could enable many local businesses to get online. The platform will also encourage consumers to buy local.

Requirements

Council wishes to appoint an organisation that has a trading platform solution that could be enabled quickly and allow trading online to start within 4 weeks of appointment. The organisation will be responsible for establishing the online presence of those businesses that desire to be part of the platform. Council’s role will be to make our local businesses aware of the opportunity. The appointed organisation will work with the businesses to establish the online presence and all that entails, e.g. product or service details, prices, photos, etc.

It is envisaged that this local platform will cover multiple sectors and as such should be easy to navigate for consumers whether they wish to purchase clothing, giftware or food.

Council and the appointed organisation will operate the project under a jointly signed Memorandum of Understanding, which in the first instance, will last for a period of six months before review.

Budget/Costs

It is believed that this solution is a commercial opportunity for the appointed organisation and they will establish trading relationships with each of the businesses that ‘sign-up’ to join the platform.

As such, the Council will not pay the appointed organisation, nor will it take any revenue during the trial period. Council staff will help to promote the opportunity. Continued promotion beyond the six months period will be based on feedback gathered from local businesses which proves that it is good value for money for those which join.

Timescales

Expressions of Interest should be returned by 5pm on Friday 19th June 2020. It is envisaged that an initial 6 months trial period will commence on in July 2020.

Assessment of Expressions of Interest

Your expression of interest should include the material enclosed at the end of this documentation.

Depending on the number of submissions received, a further assessment stage will be required including due diligence, and progression of the project will be subject to the agreement of Council. Such diligence may include: current financial and legal position, current company standing and works in progress, technology capability, and operational capability in line with project requirements.

Legals

Council reserves the right not to appoint any organisation that submits an Expression of Interest.

*Freedom of Information (FOI)*

Council is bound to comply with FOI requests and by submitting an EoI, you acknowledge that your response and any further relevant information provided may be disclosed under FOI (subject to the relevant Commercial Confidentiality Exclusions). We will endeavour to ensure that where necessary any FOI requests relating to your information will be answered in liaison with you.

You should be aware that should there be an award of contract, information in relation to the contract may be published on our website, this will include the contract title, name and address of the winning tenderer and the award value. This will be published without further consultation.

*Period of Validity*

You are required to keep your Expression of Interest valid for acceptance for a period of ninety days from the closing date for receipts.

*Confidentiality*

You should treat the submitted documents as private and confidential between oneself and Council. Council will reciprocate this confidentiality.

*Official Amendments*

If it is necessary for Council to amend the documentation in any way, prior to receipt of expressions of interest, everyone will be notified in writing simultaneously. If appropriate, the deadline for receipt will be extended.

*Canvassing*

Canvassing of any official of Council, concerning the consideration of the expression of interest or who directly or indirectly obtains or attempts to obtain information from such official concerning the proposed or any other quotation will be disqualified.

*Bribery Act 2010*

Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council is subject to the Bribery Act 2010 and therefore has a zero tolerance to any form of bribery. The Council is committed to free and fair competition in all its business dealings.

If a contractor, or anyone acting on behalf of a contractor, offers a bribe to a Council Official or an elected Member in order to secure a contract, their submission will be null and void, or if the contract has been awarded, it will be terminated with no penalty to Council.

Furthermore, if any person or organisation who is working on behalf of the Council, such as a Consultant, offers or accepts a bribe in respect of the award of Council business, their contract with Council will cease immediately, with no penalty to Council. For more information on Council’s policy, please visit here: https://www.causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk/council/publications-policies/anti-fraud-bribery-and-corruption-policy

*Accuracy*

All information included within the expression of interest should be accurate. The inclusion of information that is found to be false or misleading may result in exclusion from any further competition.

Furthermore, in the event that false or misleading information comes to light after a tenderer has been awarded a contract, this may be considered as grounds for termination of the contract.

Submission

All submissions should be made through <https://e-sourcingni.bravosolution.co.uk/web/login.shtml>

Your expression of interest should include the following:

* A brief introduction to your organisation, including track record, key personnel and current trading status or key projects underway (maximum of two sides of A4)
* A summary of your proposal, which includes a briefing on the platform offered including functionality, an outline of the pricing structure proposed, including review timetables of pricing, projected income from the project based on sign ups, projected outcomes and outputs for the local economy (maximum of three sides of A4)
* A summary of compliance with industry standards, and a summary of inputs and requirements from Council (maximum of two sides of A4)
* The completion of the following preliminary checklist – further detail will be sought during the implementation stage (or tender stage depending on interest).

Expression of Interest Checklist

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| Criteria | Yes/No |
|  |  |
| The proposed platform is provided at no cost to Council. |  |
| Businesses hosted by the platform should have a business address within, and be trading from the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area. |  |
| Any revenue generated by the implementation of this platform during the trial period will remain with the provider. |  |
| The system provided should be fit-for-purpose, and able to handle large numbers of user, customers and transactions; any breaks in service for maintenance, updates or format changes should be agreed in advance with Council. |  |
| The platform should offer the requisite level of security required to ensure the safety of users including SSL encryption, as well as being user friendly, meeting WC3 accessibility standards and compliant with UK / WWW Industry Standards, and compatible with all devices and browsers. |  |
| The platform, all intellectual property attached to the platform, branding, and any other aspects of the online system will remain the property of the provider. |  |
| If successful, the proposed system will be implemented in partnership with Council for an initial six month period, and continued support will be dependent on positive feedback from those participating in the programme. |  |
| This evaluation will be undertaken by an independent body, provided by Council. |  |
| Council will continue to support its existing programmes, including Taste Causeway and Digital Causeway, without prejudice. |  |
| Council undertakes to liaise with local businesses to promote the platform for a six month initial period – the frequency and nature of this promotion will be agreed during the implementation stage of this project. |  |
| The platform must be able to provide the following business essential functionality:   * Establish a unique online presence * Advertise products / services * Facilitate an order / purchase * Receive payment * Coordinate and track orders (if relevant) * Provide adequate help desk provision, to address customer complaints or difficulties, through an existing, or to-be-agreed process, which in no way reflects on the service provided by Council |  |
| The provider undertakes to monitor items for sale on the platform – as with other platforms, products which cannot be sold should include firearms/weapons/knives, pharmaceuticals, used or second-hand items, bootleg or fake items, pets, (but not including pet related goods), etc. Essentially, nothing should be sold on the platform which can bring Council (as a partner) into disrepute. This list is not exhaustive, but the provider will agree such items prior to progressing, if successful. |  |