Folkestone & Hythe
District Council

Report Number **C/21/43**

To:	**Cabinet**
Date:	**20th October 2021**
Status:	**Non-Key Decision**
Responsible Officers:	**Ewan Green - Director of Place**
	Katharine Harvey - Chief Economic Development Officer
Cabinet Member:	**Councillor Ray Field - Cabinet Member for Digital Transformation**

SUBJECT: **Folkestone Community WiFi Pilot Project**

SUMMARY: This report seeks endorsement for the Kent County Council-led Community WiFi pilot project in Folkestone and seeks agreement to provide member and officer resources in support.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:
Local community support through the involvement of FHDC is required to ensure the success of this pilot project. While the Community WiFi project set-up and initial running costs will be provided by Kent County Council, potential funding from FHDC may be required for its continuation over the longer term.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
1. **To receive and note report C/21/43.**
2. **To endorse, and agree that the Council actively participates in the Kent County Council Community WiFi pilot project in Folkestone.**
3. **To agree that the Council chairs the project Steering Group.**
4. **To note that further updates will be provided following conclusion of the initial feasibility study.**
5. **To agree that Council resources required for the project, beyond those available from Kent County Council, be considered as part of the Council's normal budget setting processes.**

1.   BACKGROUND

1.1   Digital inclusion is a strategic priority included in the Council's Corporate Plan and identified in the supporting Action Plan under the theme Digital Inclusion & Connectivity.

1.2   Kent County Council (KCC) has recently scoped out a pilot project to provide low-income areas with free Wi-Fi access to ensure that those who are digitally disadvantaged are able to access services meaningfully (including access to council services, such as education and health and social care platforms) through the internet.

1.3   Community Wi-Fi will help support those on a low income, by giving access to digital services and information. It will benefit those who may be reluctant to have internet installed due to confidence and motivation or who do not have the monies to pay for a broadband/data contract due to limited income. The project will seek to address the 'access barrier' to digital exclusion and provide an opportunity for residents on low income and are digitally disadvantaged to access services 'digitally' that are meaningful to them. Without this access to Wi-Fi, even if a person has the skills to access they are often unable to use 'digital' support and enhance their digital skills.

1.4   By providing community Wi-Fi to low-income areas where many people are unemployed, this project potentially also opens up access to employment through enabling access to online job applications, creating CVs and accessing online learning opportunities. Businesses and visitors to the area will also be able to use the community wifi, thereby encouraging business connectivity and growth and the employment of local people.

1.5   Research has been undertaken by KCC into digital exclusion in Folkestone & Hythe. The geographic unit that KCC uses for their analysis is the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) which is a local area unit used to publish Census of Population statistics.

1.6   Some of the characteristics identified for the Folkestone & Hythe district are:
   • Two thirds of LSOAs (Lower Super Output Areas – small geographic areas used for publishing Census data) have one of the four digitally excluded profiles;
   • The research identifies that those most likely to be digitally excluded are mature and older people and residents of working age on low incomes;
   • 20.9% of LSOAs in Folkestone and Hythe are in the 10% most likely to be digitally excluded neighbourhoods in Kent;
   • A significant higher proportion of households uses the internet less than every day for LSOAs (22.7%) than in Kent as a whole;
   • The average broadband speed per LSOA is 59.2Mbps, which is significantly lower than Kent (66Mbps); and
   • The average proportion of households per LSOA with poor broadband is 0.5%, is the same as the Kent average.

1.7   KCC is seeking to take forward a pilot Community WiFi project in three districts and those that have been selected are Folkestone & Hythe, Swale and Thanet. It is intended that in each district one community wifi pilot is

provided. Over the longer term, and subject to the pilots, KCC's intention is to roll out the programme so that all districts across the county have community wifi in a specific area of identified need.

1.8 The costs of establishing the Community WiFi project in the pilot areas will be fully met by KCC who also envisage providing the initial 12 months of funding for maintaining the system. Over the longer term, funding to maintain the community wifi is expected to come from another source, such as other government programmes, from the district or town councils, or potentially from CIL or S106 receipts.

1.9 As mentioned earlier, this pilot project aligns strongly with, and will support delivery of, key Council priorities including:

- **Corporate Plan 2021-30 'Creating Together Tomorrow'** recognises the need for digital inclusion and connectivity within Service Ambition 4 - Quality Homes and Infrastructure.
- **Customer Access Strategy** identifies the need to increase opportunities for our customers to connect with the Council and access services online.
- **Folkestone Town Centre Place Plan** (Mission 5 - Access to opportunity) identifies free access to wifi as an action which will support social and economic inclusion.

2. COMMUNITY WIFI PROJECT IN FOLKESTONE

2.1 The project aims to provide community wifi for a specific small area within the district as a pilot project. While residents in the specific streets within the selected LSOA will be able to fully access the community wifi, access will extend beyond this boundary, but this will diminish with distance as the strength of the wifi signal weakens.

2.2 It has been identified that Folkestone Harbour ward has the highest number of residents that are likely to benefit most from 'free' community wifi provision. The LSOA area is outlined below:

Figure 1: Folkestone Harbour LSOA 0014A

Source: NOMIS

Establishing the Community WiFi Project

2.3   KCC is commissioning a feasibility study which will determine the costs and technicalities of implementing community wifi within the specific LSOA area. This will include looking at the existing provision, identifying the lampposts for the deployment of hardware (KCC Highways have already given permission for their use) and the practicalities of establishing routers within the area, where needed.

2.4   The feasibility study will also include surveying a sample of residents face-to-face to establish the potential level of demand for the community wifi system. KCC has been provided guidance on locations where field workers are most likely to be able to capture residents that this project aims to support.

2.5   It is expected that the feasibility study will take 4 - 6 weeks to complete and the results should therefore be available from late November.

2.6   The outcome of the feasibility study will determine the cost for establishing the community wifi in this area of Folkestone and the running costs for an initial 12 months period. A request has been made for the study to also provide an estimation of the longer term costs of maintaining the system.

2.7   Once the feasibility study is completed (and assuming there are no showstoppers), the work to put in the required hardware on public realm will be undertaken. At this stage it is uncertain how long this will take, but it is envisaged that it will be completed within a 2-3 month period.

2.8   It is proposed that a Steering Group is established to take forward and to champion this Community WiFi project. As well as representatives from the district, town and county councils, this group should include voluntary organisations that can support residents to access the system and individuals that can champion the community wifi amongst local residents.

2.9   It is proposed that the Steering Group is chaired by the FHDC Cabinet Member for Digital Transformation with representatives from Kent County Council, Folkestone Town Council, relevant members of the Folkestone Community Works CLLD Local Action Group and other community representation which will be identified in due course.

2.10   The intended outcomes from the project are:

- More residents are able to access public services online that are meaningful to them (e.g. Housing, NHS) resulting in more effective and timely support.

- Younger residents can access educational resources online and as a result can maintain and/or enhance their studies, resulting in the ability of the younger person to achieve their full potential.

- More residents are able to access online training opportunities and platforms for job searching which will support them to achieve economic well-being.

- More residents can access the internet and use devices to socialise and see friends and family, reducing feelings of social isolation.

3. FUNDING THE FOLKESTONE COMMUNITY WIFI PROJECT

3.1 The funding for establishing the Community WiFi project in Folkestone will be met by Kent County Council, which has also agreed to fund the running costs for an initial 12 month period (subject to the feasibility study establishing that these costs are reasonable).

3.2 It is clear that the aims of this community wifi project accord closely with the objectives of the Folkestone Community Works CLLD programme and the chosen LSOA (as well as the other two) falls within the geographic boundary of this programme.

3.3 Therefore, there is a possibility of FCW CLLD funding being available to support this project. Further discussion is underway with KCC over how this funding can work in tandem with their own, in order to potentially use some of the ERDF capital funding to extend the initial period of financial support that KCC would provide for this pilot in Folkestone.

3.4 Beyond the potential for CLLD funding, any resources needed to support the project beyond the establishment and pilot will be subject to consideration alongside other council priorities and follow the council's normal processes for decision-making.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

4.1 There is risk management involved in this project.

Perceived risk	Seriousness	Likelihood	Preventative action
Lack of community demand	High	Low	Likely demand for the project will emerge from the feasibility study. The Steering Group will include local residents that can champion the project and organisations that can provide support to help residents access the internet through the community wifi. FCW CLLD funding is also potentially available for projects to improve resident's skills to access the internet through the community wifi projects.

The project has low value for money	High	Low	The cost of establishing the project will be identified through the feasibility study, including estimates of the long term maintenance costs. The long term cost will be considered alongside the usage to determine value for money, as part of any FHDC decision to fund beyond the initial KCC-funded period.
FHDC financial constraints means lack of funding available for long term continuation of project	Med	Low	This project aligns fully with one of the five Corporate Plan priorities for the next three years. There are a number of potential funding sources for this within the council. Other organisations, such as Folkestone Town Council, could potentially provide the funding.

5. LEGAL/FINANCIAL AND OTHER CONTROLS/POLICY MATTERS

5.1 **Legal Officer's Comments (NM)**
There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

5.2 **Finance Officer's Comments (LW)**
As the report outlines, there are no financial implications arising directly from the proposed pilot project as Kent County Council will meet the cost. Should the Council decide to continue with the project beyond the initial 12 month period then a further report seeking budget approval for this will be required.

5.3 **Communication Officer Comments (JW)**

The scheme has some positive external communications opportunities and, if agreed, a communications and engagement strategy will be developed in conjunction with Kent County Council.

5.4 **Climate Change Implications (OF)** *[Pilot reporting period]*
There are no climate change implications arising directly from this report. However, there is scope for overall positive climate impacts as a result of providing community wifi such as:

- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions from travel, construction and buildings – free community wifi can potentially lead to reduction in emissions from commuting to gain access to wifi.
- Resilience – Studies have shown that climate change will pose a threat to wifi connections therefore measures should be put in place to protect the wifi infrastructure from effects of hotter summer and wetter winters.
- Social and economic impacts – by providing free community wifi provide opportunity for the digitally disadvantaged to access council services thereby improving the overall quality of life.

5.5 **Diversity and Equalities Implications (GE)**

There are no negative equality and diversity implications directly arising from this report. The Folkestone Community Wi-Fi Project supports the strategic priority of 'Digital Inclusion & Connectivity' as documented in the council's Corporate Plan and will help towards addressing the 'access barrier' to digital exclusion and provide an opportunity for low income, digitally disadvantaged to access services 'digitally' as well as enhance their digital skills.

6. **CONTACT OFFICERS AND BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Councillors with any questions arising out of this report should contact the following officer prior to the meeting

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