

Norfolk and Suffolk Council for Digital Tech - minutes

Chair: Chris Sargisson (for Neil Miles)

Date: Tuesday 24 November 2020 **Time:** 14:00–16:00

Videoconference

Present

Chris Sargisson, Norfolk Chamber (Acting Chair)	Lisa Perkins, BT
Anette Gilham, Ipswich Borough Council	Maddie Coupe, New Anglia LEP
Catherine Richards, New Anglia Colleges Gp.	Mark Thomas, Coderus
Ellen Tilney, Norwich City Council	Sarah Steed; Norwich University of the Arts
Jai Raithatha, Suffolk County Council	Stef Thorne, University of Suffolk
Julian Munson, New Anglia LEP	Thea Goodluck, Tech Nation
Kate de Vries, Norfolk County Council	Viv Gillespie, New Anglia Colleges Gp.
Richard Glinn, Growth Hub Manager (Presenting)	
Brigette Currin, Tech East (taking minutes)	

Apologies

Chris Starkie, New Anglia LEP	John Fagan, Petagene
Dean Withey, Ubisend	Marlon Bowser, HTK
Dominic Keen, Britbots	Neil Miles, Inawisdom (Chair)
Fiona Lettice, UEA	Peter Brady, Orbital Media
Graham Masterson, Consultant	Roberta Willner, Norfolk County Council
James Duez, Rainbird	Steve Kierney, Epos Now
John Dugmore, Suffolk Chamber	

Welcome and apologies

CS (stepping in as chair for this meeting on behalf of NM) welcomed members and noted apologies.

Matters Arising

Previous minutes were agreed with actions completed.

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Where we are today: 2020 market insights and celebrating success stories (TR)

TR gave a roundup on the work which had taken place since the previous meeting in September.

Despite COVID-19 success continues and innovation is still progressing well within the region. TR highlighted several companies having made headline success as well as start-ups receiving funding and ready for launch.

There have been 2 big wins for the region which are the Connected Innovation Project and towns deal funding for the Digital Hub in Norwich.

New programmes of support have gone live: Tech East 100, Innovation Network (LoRaWAN) and the upcoming Go Digital (SME digital adoption) programme.

Upcoming strategic opportunities include the publication of a '12 Clusters of Tech' report in May 2021. TR will be leading the development of this through Tech East's membership of the UK Tech Cluster Group (UKTCG). This is an opportunity for narrative and communications to tell the story about what the regions tech niches, strength and specialisms are in more detail. In January 2021, a series of workshops with SCC will commence. These will articulate the challenges the organisations have and where local tech businesses can help solve the problems.

In terms of policy engagement between the CDT, the region and central government, 3 members of CDT attended a recent workshop with DCMS, continuing to voice the needs with regards to skills and talent, growth for the digital sector.

JM commented on government policy updates. Things are changing rapidly with the landscape of COVID-19 and Brexit. There will be some announcements shortly from government around funding and policy decisions in relation to The Industrial Strategy and Sector Deals with further announcements next month.

CS congratulated Tech East on the launch of Tech East 100, all the comms, social media and activity around this programme has been very positive, especially for the companies featured in the programme. CS asked what the future for the programme is?

TR responded by thanking all those involved and for sharing any comms and social media announcements. TR continued saying that the ambition is to keep the Tech East 100 list active and true to what is happening with the companies and aims to have the second event in first part of 2022. Tech East is in conversation with a major global tech organisation to build a tailored programme of workshops around supporting these companies. The Tech East 100 microsite has an interactive tool by both vertical market they service and the tech specialism. Tailored lists can be created from this tool for targeted programmes and comms.

CS questioned what aspirations would TR want to achieve with the interactive tool?

TR answered with two aspirations:

1. To actively demonstrate to external stakeholders, e.g. Investors, why we have a compelling offer within the region with a deeper narrative of each company/specialism.
2. The online tool is currently a Minimum Viable Product but could be more of a marketplace - a 'Who's Who' of Norfolk and Suffolk's leading tech businesses catering to the needs of different types of users e.g. investors, business support providers, corporates seeking to innovate or non-tech SMEs.

CS commented that Tech East has created a real asset and there is an opportunity to capitalise and get value as a region as well as driving opportunity to the businesses on the list.

Members of the CDT discussed TR's overview and expressed interest in the upcoming projects.

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Deep dive into: The Growth Hub

(RG - Role of New Anglia Growth Hub as the front-door for SME business support and signposting for specialist needs of digital business)

RG presented to CDT the role of The Growth Hub and what support it offers to businesses across Norfolk and Suffolk. It is led by the New Anglia LEP and managed by Suffolk Chamber of Commerce. The Growth Hub helps businesses access a range of business support services from a variety of sources. The service is free and impartial and can help access grants, finance, start-up support, international trade support and other specialist advice.

RG talked about the challenges the organisation faced when the pandemic hit, how they coped with the change of supporting businesses face to face to going online. The initial conversations that were being had with advisors was of despair but that has changed to positive conversations of growth and opportunities. A vast number of grant schemes were released during the year to support businesses.

RG explained each of the grant schemes in detail (copies of these are available in the accompanied presentation – appendix A).

RG informed the CDT on the new Peer Network programme supporting up to 250 eligible businesses free of charge. It consists of cohort groups of individuals to collaboratively work through common business issues. RG encouraged members to share this initiative or become involved as a business.

RG described the Scale Up New Anglia programme, designed to turn Suffolk and Norfolk business performance from 'silver' to 'gold'. Leaders of eligible businesses can access exclusive, high-value opportunities to set themselves and their business in place for market-leading growth.

In addition to the above support the Growth Hub has 2 skills advisors who help identify and tackle skills gaps within businesses.

See appendix A – copy of slide presentation.

There was discussion around the support the Growth Hub offers to business. How do we best link up Growth Hub support with tech businesses who are unable to access other niche programmes that are available? The Growth through Innovation Fund can support more tech businesses. Uptake on this has been slow and funds of over £1.6m are still available. More awareness around this funding needs to be made to local tech businesses. A more holistic role in support and sign posting through organisations such as Tech East, Tech Nation and Chambers is needed although the challenge of keeping on top of all support available is a problem.

Economic Recovery Plan update (JM)

The draft Economic Recovery Restart Plan – Progress Report was circulated with the agenda.

JM gave a brief overview of the progress report, highlighting that the digital tech sector is critical in the recovery plan as it underpins growth in every sector e.g., how does AI apply to offshore renewable energy?

The furlough scheme which was introduced to support businesses has been particularly high Arts & Entertainment, Accommodation & Food and Construction. NALEP is doing all that it can do support these sectors. The three sectors which are centre of the local industrial strategy ICT, Agriculture and Energy have been less affected by furlough, which is positive, but companies do still require specific support. There is an opportunity to get the news out that there is funding support to help with growth. The Growth through Innovation Fund needs to be pushed through the network.

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An excellent success story is the Business Resilience and Recovery Scheme where almost £4m has been granted to Norfolk and Suffolk businesses. This is a programme that is unique to Norfolk and Suffolk, put together by the LEP in a relatively short space of time and working through the Growth Hub able to support local businesses.

There has been additional funding through local authority routes including the Norfolk Strategic Fund and Suffolk Inclusive Growth Fund supporting the Connected Innovation Project. CNTC are also supporting businesses.

Numerous events have been happening over the past few months to support recovery through cross sector.

Important pieces of work have been happening to support people into jobs or becoming self-employed through training, upskilling, and advising through different partners with either grant schemes or mentoring schemes.

There have been some great examples of companies innovating over the past year. The Connected Innovation Project will help draw these to the surface. An innovation prospectus is currently being put together to include the innovation hubs across the region.

The CDT plays an important role to be the voice of the needs of the sector into government as well as helping to profile the important work that is happening across the digital tech sector and how do we translate those into case studies or attract more government funding to support growth in this sector. The CDT is also a vital link into the LEP's Innovation Board.

TR reiterated the link between the CDT and Innovation Board where NM, supported by TR, will be presenting at the next Board meeting to look at how we can join up.

Looking ahead to 2021 – Delivery Plan and Governance (TR, JM, and CS)

CS started the discussion by asking what the CDT needs to do to position the region as a centre of excellence for green tech and green innovation and digital works.

JM responded that there had been plans prior to COVID-19, to run an event to bring the energy sector together with innovation sector in order to understand their challenges and how can we bring solutions from companies within Norfolk and Suffolk. There is still a strong desire from Adastral Park to make this happen and is keen to bring key industry representatives to an AI festival which will be held in February 2021. How do we scale this up and accelerated through this CDT?

TR urged members to review the original delivery plan for our ICT/digital opportunity and to let JM, MC or TR know if there are any additional items that should be included. The document should be updated with the requirements of what is needed to support businesses through the current situation. It is also important for members to feedback on the structure of the meetings and on the content so we can continue to develop a strong voice into government through the CDT.

JM advised that the work of the CDT is reported back to the NALEP Board. CJ Green, the new chair, is particularly interested in the work of this group. JM would like the delivery plan to remain an agile strategy, recognising progress, recognise challenges and be willing to change focus due to government policies or sector deals etc.

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TR stated that he recognises as the secretariat of the CDT that we need to be agile to adapt to changes and is keen to hear feedback on the structure of the meetings, their content and the overall design of the CDT. As we approach 2021, we are aware of Brexit, post COVID, we are interested in finding new and creative ways to have the CDT operate effectively.

ACTION: Members of the Council will be approached individually for feedback and there is an opportunity to bring in new members from business as we enter 2021 (Owner: TR)

JR observed that a more substantial conversation needs to be had around the plan if it is the right thing to be doing as a council for 2021. There needs to be ownership around the plan to progress actions.

TR responded that CDT has 'cabinet responsibility for ownership of the delivery plan as it outlines the scope of work and the priorities for the Council. TR recognised the significant contribution made by members of the Council, and in particular the SME business owners who give their time voluntarily. Thought needs to be given on how to present the information succinctly to reduce the administrative burden for members. CS asked how do we connect, communicate, and get ownership, not just through the council but through the wider community to ensure the CDT fulfils its brief and is fit for purpose. It is time to review and what do we do to get individual ownership and commitment. Members need to be informing what is needed.

TG suggested that more female founders should be invited to join the CDT.

VG commented that a lot of the work being done in the Skills Task Force including the IOT submission which will be going into government in mid-December.

RG gave a general observation about getting information across to government in that as a region we are not being forceful enough to 'wave the flag high enough' for the good work being done in the region. It is important that we show that we stand together in all sectors and have a unified message going to government.

CS agreed that this region is one of the most important for the country and is an inspiring place to create technology, incubate and grow. Part of the challenge is we need to change the narrative and work on a campaign based upon we want something because someone else has got it rather than we need it. All sectors have a part to play in this and it is fundamentally crucial that we show the importance of the region to get noticed.

LP agreed with CS and stated that as the board of Tech East looks at its revised strategy, a core pillar is all around the being the Voice for the East and representing the tech sector but also supporting cross sector digital innovation and collaborating. We need to push this through the brands we do have and show the value of region.

JR expanded noting that as a region we are net contributors to UK Plc while other regions are not. Government need to invest in the region to ensure it continues to perform and we need to have this as part of the argument that without the region the UK economy will struggle. It is very important when lobbying government, as a group, we need to focus on comms and advocacy. Looking into the future we need to be clear about what we have an overview of and what it is we need to focus on.

TR concluded the discussion with the '12 Clusters of Tech' report that will be published in May 2021. This is something government is endorsing. We will only be able to celebrate three the niches and will need to be bold and ensure these are sub-sectors we can scale. This is a further opportunity to inform government and external audiences about our Inward Investment offer to the world.

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AOB

MT – Was interested to know how businesses will be supported post Brexit

TG – How do we support underrepresented founders in our region and what are we doing about it? She has set up a tech ladies coffee morning with female founders – this is having a positive impact. We need to be sign posting and sharing information, not just within the region but also to opportunities outside. We also need support businesses in being more proactive in incorporating diversity and inclusion within their businesses. TN is developing a talk around this and as a region we should be able to have open conversations. The CDT should have more female founders represented.

MC – announced that she is leaving and moving onto a new role. She thanked the CDT for all their efforts and enjoyed working with the tech community.

ST – UoS continues to work on the Digitech Centre at Adastral Park. A recent internal hothouse focusing on creative and digital within the university on how we are supporting businesses and what their areas of distinctiveness with a view to strengthening the narrative and plan. This will be shared for wide dissemination and should be available for the next CDT meeting.

ET – there are exciting developments that were discussed at the meeting. It sounds like there are interesting package of things going on and several projects that will deliver a positive change.

CS – there is a lot of work going with support agencies, Chambers, and networks to enable businesses to be informed as possible as government announce what is needed to be done regarding Brexit. This will be a big campaign to broadcast the information and where to access it. CS will advise the group when more information is available. Both Norfolk and Suffolk and chambers have information available.

Dates of 2021 Meetings

To be proposed via Doodle poll (BC) – February, May, September, December

Meeting closed

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