Commission of digital infrastructure audit and RFI for the Thames Estuary

1. Context

The Thames Estuary project was launched in July 2020 with a clear mandate to catalyse and generate growth in that part of south east England. We cover East London, South Essex and North Kent. At the heart is the river Thames and we stretch from the capital to the coast.

The Thames Estuary Growth Board – a group comprised of public and private sector members with expertise and professional backgrounds in a range of relevant fields – is focused on a positive green blue agenda to make best use of the river and its surrounds and to drive up inclusive growth. We have the potential to be a major factor in a successful future as well as make a real difference to communities now.

The Green Blue is our key document setting out a wide-ranging vision for growth and evolution in the Thames Estuary. We have ambitious plans. They include improving transport and digital infrastructure, attracting global investment, building housing, creating thousands of new jobs, and ultimately generating billions of pounds for the UK economy.

The Thames Estuary is uniquely placed; its location allows us to devise creative solutions to the area's challenges. For instance, utilising the Thames to support freight and logistics to reduce truck movements and, in turn, improve air quality in the area.

In addition, inclusive growth is key for us, looking at complex issues like education, housing and jobs, and making sure no-one is left behind. Every community needs to be able to take advantage of, and benefit from, the improvements in the area. Our recent statement on our requirements from a Thames Estuary freeport is a good illustration of this.

Digital Infrastructure

One of our ambitions is to catalyse excellent digital infrastructure in the Thames Estuary for the benefit of everyone who lives, works or visits this place.

The Thames Estuary reaches from central London out to the Kent and Essex coast. It offers a huge area with excellent connections internationally as well as to the financial and business centres of the capital.

The impact of excellent digital infrastructure across the Estuary would spark major inward investment and expedite growth. For example, evidence shows increased download speeds lead to higher productivity levels, which would benefit businesses here and those re-locating here.

For local people, the benefits are wide-ranging. Digital services like banking, entertainment, healthcare and communication with family, friends and work is

dependent on capable digital infrastructure systems. Likewise, new technologies like location-based GPS, and emerging trends towards Smart Cities rely upon strong digital capability.

The Thames Estuary Production Corridor is part of the Thames Estuary. The emergence of creative industries, including film and television production, and video games and associate technologies, would be boosted by improvements to digital capabilities in this region.

We are also aware that nationally and within the Estuary we are not as advanced as we should be in this area. For a modern industrial base to thrive and grow we must exponentially improve the digital capacity across the Estuary. There are many initiatives underway in different parts of the Estuary and the government has indicated that it wants to support improved digital capacity. Our role is to enable and support investment from both private and public sector and to ensure it is done in a way that is timely and has the greatest possible impact.

We have a number of major opportunities that we need to assess. For instance, the London Resort will be a major innovative tourist destination at Ebbsfleet; the introduction of the London Markets into Barking; and the many large-scale housing programmes such as at Thamesmead, Royal Docks and Barkingside.

We recognise that a digital approach needs to be multi-faceted. There are several data centres but not enough; cabling and digital connectivity is inconsistent; 5G is not fully understood and is largely a discussion around high streets; and we are not providing the skills and training close to where digital capacity could grow. Through this work we are wanting to investigate specific areas in more detail but we are also looking at a forward thinking progressive approach to digital opportunities.

We are not seeking to understand the potential of better digital although any work will reference this. What we really need to understand is how do we accelerate investment and activity in the right areas to have the best possible impact. Our role is to facilitate this progress so we will also need to understand the key stakeholders and their interests in being part of a digitally connected Estuary.

We need expertise to help us engage with the private sector and to understand and evaluate their ambitions. This means approaching the major providers and through an RFI understand and access their approaches for the Estuary. From this we will need to evaluate and develop partnerships. Our thinking is that a focus on major significant opportunities may be a useful catalyst to this work.

We also want to understand how to digitally connect with communities and to ensure that we support inclusive growth across the Estuary. This is more than simply connecting homes to better Wi-Fi but is about ensuring that there are jobs in the digital sector or creating the education and skills training through modern well-connected facilities.

The final aspect is guidance on what and when. We need to draw on external experience as to the right phasing of any approach and to understand the different layers of opportunity as they relate to different stakeholders and audiences. We are

open to new ideas and approaches as we see this as an opportunity to set the direction of the Estuary for at least the next decade.

2. Specification

The Thames Estuary Growth Board would like to better understand the current digital infrastructure of the region; to understand the commercial opportunities and how companies are planning to access them; and to identify a set of priority opportunities with a detailed approach to achieving them.

Lines of enquiry would be:
- We want you to focus on digital infrastructure around cabling, data, mobile connectivity, network speeds and we also want an assessment of emerging opportunities to future proof any actions and investment
- We want to understand the needs for infrastructure across the Estuary – this should be a detailed analysis of current capacity as well as business and community needs
- We want to understand the benefits of digital infrastructure on the Estuary economy and to identify those opportunities that will have the greatest impact
- We want to understand the needs of stakeholders both as end users and those driving the overarching strategy – this is about understanding stakeholders, communities, local authorities, government, businesses and individuals. Set out their requirements and expectations and set out how the Thames Estuary should work with these to maximise the benefit
- We want to understand the top-level opportunities across the estuary with specific programmes and projects referenced with a prioritisation approach applied – taking a top 20 opportunities with an assessment of needs against them. This could across different sectors and also across different geographical areas
- We want to understand the current ambitions and plans of the private sector and to understand if they have detailed approaches already considered and mapped out
- We want to establish a framework for an RFI that addresses challenges and mitigations; investment priorities; and relevant partners to facilitate delivery
- We want to understand what can be achieved by when – this should be a multi-layered view that considers different audiences, geography and priorities
- We want to establish the RFI and to understand how we will assess the quality and potential of the evidence we receive

Requirements
We would ask the supplier to provide:

- A detailed set of reports which answers those lines of enquiry identified with evidence, analysis, insight and relevant data. Each to include an Executive Summary. These reports may be against specific phases of the work undertaken as well as against specific outcomes.

- A graphical model or map that illustrates clearly the current digital infrastructure story of the Thames Estuary. For example, those areas in the Estuary that suffer from poor connectivity and those that don't. This should

highlight our top 20 opportunities for investment and areas of potential growth including data storage, cabling and mobile connectivity.

- A detailed analysis of needs, stakeholders and investment opportunities across the Estuary with an explanation of the roles that each stakeholder has and how we should engage them and what value they can bring to the Estuary

- An outline framework for an RFI with associated detail and roadmap.

Proposal

Suppliers are asked to provide:

1. A detailed methodology setting out how they will deliver this project and their capability, including resources – setting out phases, capacity, timescales (2,000 words).
2. A case study describing delivery of a similar project (1,000 words)
3. A cost which does not exceed £150,000. Please engage us directly around costings versus requirements.

Timeline

The process for submission will have until the 15th January 5.00pm.

The submissions will be evaluated and a decision taken with the aim for the delivery of the commission to be in February 2021 subject to contract details being finalised.

The work should take about 3-4 months to complete but we will consider proposals within your submissions about how you will timetable your activity

Other information
The procurement is done through the Redbridge Pro Contract portal and we will follow the policies of Redbridge to manage this tender