

## Members' Library Service Request Form

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**REPORT TO:** Members' Library Service

**MEETING DATE:**

**BY:** Head of Development

**SUBJECT:** SOLE External Evaluation Report Year 1

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## **1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To provide Members with the year one external evaluator's report on the UK Community Renewal Fund SOLE project.

## **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 To note the content of this report and the accompanying evaluation report.

## **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF) aimed to support people and communities across the UK, creating opportunities to trial new approaches and innovative ideas at the local level. The Scottish Tech Army (STA) was one beneficiary of a grant that was used to develop and deploy the SOLE platform in East Lothian.
- 3.2 The platform was developed to provide an easy-to-use online shopping and community experience to help local people rediscover and connect with local shops, services, and amenities. It was intended to enable local businesses in East Lothian to trade together online as well as in their physical spaces. The purpose of the project as funded was to complete the full launch of the platform in the Dunbar and East Linton area (where an initial pilot had taken place), to roll SOLE Scotland out to a further five communities in East Lothian, and to cover the ongoing cost of software licencing for a total of 3 years.
- 3.3 The appended evaluation report covers the period to March 2023 and was undertaken by Progressive Partnership Ltd on behalf of East Lothian Council. The production of an external project evaluation was a condition of the UKCRF and a copy of this report was submitted to the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities. There is no requirement under the terms of the funding to undertake any further evaluation on the project.
- 3.4 The evaluator's main findings can be found on page 8 of the report and conclusions on page 25.

#### **4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 None.

#### **5 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

5.1 The subject of this report does not affect the wellbeing of the community or have a significant impact on equality, the environment or economy.

#### **6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 Financial – none

6.2 Personnel – none

#### **7 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

7.1 Appendix 1: SOLE Evaluation Report March 2024.

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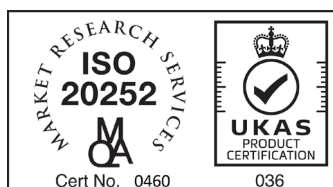
progressive

East Lothian Council

SOLE

Evaluation Report

March 2024



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First published in March 2023.

Final edits February 2024.

# Introduction

The UK Community Renewal Fund aims to support people and communities most in need across the UK, creating opportunities to trial new approaches and innovative ideas at the local level. It has provided funding via local authorities with the aim of investing in skills, community and place, local business, and supporting people into employment. The Scottish Tech Army was one beneficiary of a grant that was used to develop and deploy the SOLE platform in East Lothian.

The SOLE Scotland platform was developed in partnership by the Scottish Tech Army (STA) and Optimum Capacity Services in response to multiple requests for support from communities in East Lothian that were, in the first instance, seeking to mitigate the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on local businesses and communities. SOLE provides multiple opportunities for online business trading, community event promotion, and publicity for community organisations.

The purpose of the project was to complete the full launch of the platform in the Dunbar and East Linton area (where an initial pilot had taken place) and to roll SOLE Scotland out to a further five communities in East Lothian.

As stated on the platform: *SOLE provides an easy-to-use online shopping and community experience to rediscover and connect with local shops, services and amenities.* It was designed to enable local businesses in East Lothian to trade together online as well as in their physical spaces. It covers six areas in East Lothian comprising Dunbar and East Linton; Haddington and Lammermuir; Musselburgh; North Berwick Coastal; Preston, Seton and Gosford; and Fa'side.

ELC supported networking with a range of partner organisations to support delivery of the project, with STA receiving project funding and having overall responsibility for planning, delivery and evaluation of the project.

Funding received from the Community Renewal Fund included:

**Table 1: Funding received**

Project Name	Maximum UK CRF Contribution £	Match Funding (from ELC) £	Total Project Cost £
SOLE	£424,500	£52,000	£476,500

The funding package was designed to be spent on deployment of the SOLE Scotland platform to the communities named above plus increased marketing and promotion of the platform across the Area.. The project costs include platform subscription fees for each of the communities for three years, staff and contractor costs to launch the platform in each community and marketing costs to ensure that the platform was widely known and well adopted by these communities.

## Objectives and approach

Award of the grant was conditional on measurement of the project's success. The key performance indicators (KPIs) for the successful deployment of SOLE Scotland were as follows:

1. 100% of local independent businesses on the platform with an information only listing

2. 70% of businesses to have claimed their profile and customised their listing
3. 30% of businesses to have a shop on the platform
4. 70% of community groups to have claimed their profiles
5. 2 community posts per section (e.g., news, offers, what's on and community) per week
6. 2,000 unique hits per month (per community) on the platform that lasted longer than 30 seconds
7. App downloads - 10,000 downloads in one year
8. Referral business to businesses' own web sites clearly attributable to SOLE Scotland
9. Sales - online conversion rate of at least 2%

These KPIs formed the basis for the evaluation (data for which was sent in reports by the STA to Progressive colleagues). This data was supplemented by findings from qualitative depth interviews with key stakeholders (STA/SOLE colleagues, ELC colleagues, Local Area Partnership representatives, businesses/community groups on the platform) and an online survey of businesses and community groups in East Lothian.

It is important to note that the project as a whole started in March 2022 SOLE was launched publicly in June 2022. Research took place from August to December 2022. It is also important to note that at the point of research the project was still very much ongoing and STA were involved with communities in East Lothian.

## **Evaluation approach**

### Data sources for the evaluation

Data pertaining to the KPIs has been collected and monitored continuously during the delivery of SOLE by colleagues at SOLE and the STA – baseline assumptions have been made for each KPI (e.g., using council business lists to ascertain the baseline number of local businesses in each region). The data extract for the purpose of the evaluation was drawn and delivered to Progressive by the STA in December 2022.

For the qualitative research, colleagues at the STA introduced Progressive to the Community Engagement Specialists working in the regions who subsequently contacted their network (of community organisations, local businesses, trade associations etc.) to recruit participants who had experience of the SOLE platform.

For the online business survey, Progressive sent an open survey link to ELC and STA who subsequently distributed the link to their business lists and businesses with a presence on the platform.

### Inception meeting

Progressive recommended beginning the research process by holding a comprehensive briefing meeting by video conference between the Progressive executive team and the ELC-STA team. This was thought to be essential in ensuring an effective working relationship between partners on the project. This briefing meeting was designed to: discuss the background to the project, finalise the research methodology, identify all stakeholders and agree on progress updates and reporting.

The first introductory meeting took place on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2022 and was attended by two team members from Progressive and two from STA. The main purpose of the meeting was to provide background understanding of SOLE. This was followed by a wider team meeting attended by two members from STA, one from ELC and three from Progressive. The purpose of this was to outline the KPIs, review the method of evaluation and agree deliverables from all parties.



Outcomes of the briefing meetings were sent to the client team by way of a short Word document that summarised attendees, objectives, outcomes, final timelines etc.

### Qualitative research with stakeholders

The approach to evaluation was designed on the basis that STA and ELC would provide a full list of named contacts for all stakeholders. The intention was that they would be primed by STA and ELC that the evaluation was taking place. Names of stakeholders were sent to Progressive by STA throughout the month of November – collated mainly by the Community Engagement Specialists working on SOLE who were introduced to Progressive by STA. A total of 22 stakeholder contacts were delivered to Progressive.

Recruitment took place via telephone by Progressive’s skilled in-house team of qualitative recruiters. A total of 16 in-depth interviews took place throughout November and December 2022. The sample structure can be seen below:

**Table 2: Qualitative sample structure**

Stakeholder type		16	Region		16
STA/SOLE		6	Dunbar		4
Business owners		4	East Linton		1
Local Area Partners		3	Musselburgh		2
Local Trade Association		2	North Berwick Coastal		2
East Lothian Council		1	East Lothian Wide (STAs)		7

Interviews were conducted via telephone and online video-conferencing platforms (Zoom and MS Teams), dependent on the respondent preferences. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes on average. All interviews were conducted using a topic guide that had been agreed with the STA/ELC team beforehand. Interviews were recorded wherever possible. Transcripts and notes and quotes were made from the recordings. The interviews focused on the outcomes of key activities including:

- The user research conducted by the STA
- Community liaison
- Data gathering
- Marketing and building local awareness
- Training and support
- Future support for the project

It was hoped that Progressive would have KPI data before the interviews took place and would be able to investigate/scrutinise the data during interviews, identify gaps and request supporting information when required. This was not possible as the KPI data was delivered towards the end of December after all interviews were complete.

### Quantitative research with businesses and other organisations

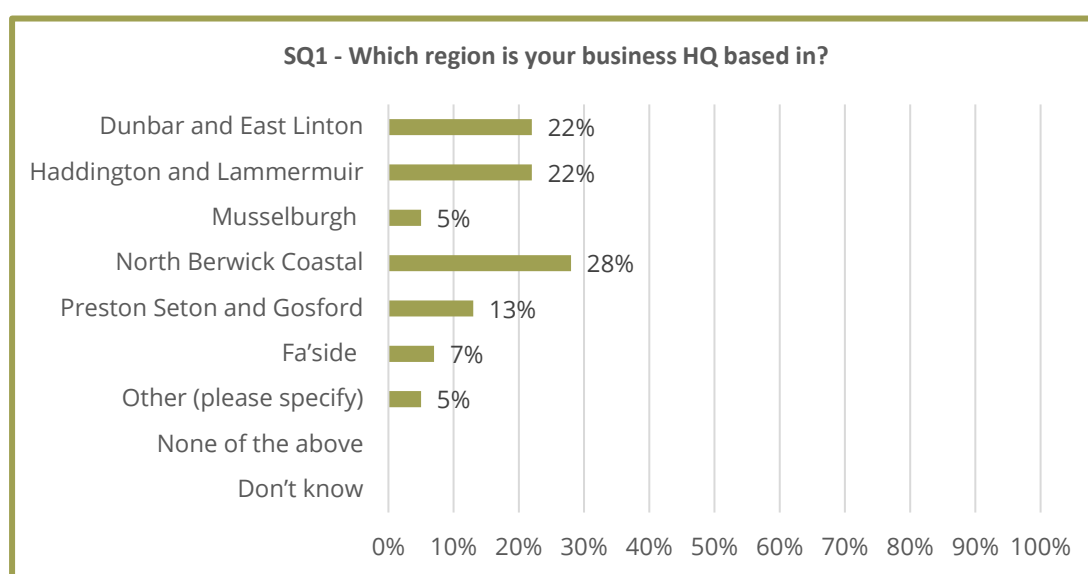
Progressive designed and scripted a quantitative survey that was disseminated via email by STA and ELC to businesses and community groups in East Lothian. The questionnaire took on average four minutes on average to complete. The key areas to cover in the survey included:

1. Referral business to each businesses’ own website(s) clearly attributable to SOLE Scotland
2. Sales – online conversion rates
3. User experiences

Progressive thoroughly tested the script internally before it went live, to ensure it precisely matched the agreed questionnaire, all questions and response codes were included, and that all the question routing worked properly. ELC and STA had the opportunity to view and sign off the script before it was distributed to businesses and community groups. STA distributed the survey link to 458 contacts in total comprising a mixture of businesses and community groups. ELC distributed it to 960 contacts, equating to roughly 80% of its business directory across the local authority.

The survey opened on 22<sup>nd</sup> November and closed on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2022. At the outset of the evaluation, the Progressive and client team agreed that the aim was to achieve a minimum of 200 responses. The final response was 87 which was disappointingly low. The sample composition can be seen below:

**Chart 1: Quantitative sample structure**



**Base: total sample = (87)**

### Review of KPI data

As described in the 'Data sources' section above, at the outset of the project, the Progressive and STA-ELC team agreed that STA would supply Progressive with data to inform evaluation of the KPIs. This was expected at regular intervals throughout the evaluation period (Sept-Dec 2022) to help Progressive understand change over time – and, in turn, to be able to predict the likelihood of meeting KPIs by the end of the three-year funding period. However, due to delays collating the data (and changes to the baseline assumptions for some KPIs), only one KPI data extract was supplied to Progressive at the end of the fieldwork period in December.

To inform extraction of the KPI data, Progressive provided a detailed data specification to STA, including the information sources used to collate the KPI data and questions around whether the KPI target was achieved, and the mitigating factors if KPIs were not achieved. The subsequent data files provided by STA included a full list of the businesses/community groups across East Lothian, data on downloads of the SOLE app and data on app usage (engagement time, views per user etc.). This was supplemented with commentary to explain the basis for each KPI and the changes in policy/approach that affected their delivery.

The Progressive team then reviewed the data to understand overall KPI performance and performance within subgroups (e.g., by region).

## **Reporting**

This report covers analysis of the three sources of data outlined above:

- The KPI data supplied by STA;
- The online business survey; and
- The qualitative stakeholder depth interviews.

The structure of the report follows each KPI – interweaving findings from the business survey and stakeholder depths to flesh out the KPI findings. The report provides supplementary analysis of the depth interviews covering stakeholders' views on the design and implementation of SOLE, as well as user experiences of the platform. We also look to the future of the SOLE – what is needed to take platform further and improve engagement from businesses and consumers.

# Main findings

The body of the report sets out the evaluation findings. These largely consider the evidence used to assess progress towards meeting each of the key performance indicators, together with a broad assessment of whether each KPI has been met and the mitigating factors if KPIs were not achieved. The sections following key performance indicators reports on outcomes of key activities such as the pilot in Dunbar, community liaison and ongoing support from different stakeholders.

## Key performance indicators

A total of nine key performance indicators are reported on in this section. Each KPI is identified in a box with the summary of outcome. This is followed by an explanation of approach to each KPI.

### ***100% of local independent businesses on the platform with an information only listing***

Because businesses were unhappy to have their details published without their consent none of this basic listing information was published. As a consequence, this KPI was not met.

### Review of KPI data

STA collated baseline information by (i.e., the total number of businesses in East Lothian) by scraping a variety of online data sources, followed by manual review and clean-up. A data snapshot was taken from SOLE database in December 2022. Businesses could have been listed across multiple categories, so the dataset was de-duped to give unique businesses, with a total of 1,423 across the local authority. As a cross-reference, East Lothian Council's business list extract used for distributing the online survey had 960 businesses eligible for contact, estimated to be approximately 80% of the total number of businesses in the local authority, therefore giving an estimated total of 1,200. It is likely that there are some discrepancies between the two datasets, but the overall totals are similar and therefore coverage in the SOLE database is deemed to be an accurate measure of the total number of businesses. The dataset does include some larger businesses (e.g., supermarkets) but these are relatively few in number and do not materially inflate the number.

The original intention had been to display all businesses in the SOLE database together with a basic listing but feedback from some local businesses early in the project was that businesses were unhappy to have their information listed on the platform without their agreement, so the decision was taken to show only those businesses that had claimed their profile (i.e., opted into a presence on the platform).

### Qualitative research with stakeholders

Qualitative research indicated the source of discontent to come partly from the pilot stage of the project. At that stage the site was considered by some to be clunky and SOLE had listed incorrect information from some local business and without their permissions.

Insights from some who were not supportive of SOLE suggested that businesses in Dunbar were less likely than any other area to be listed on the site because of the Our Dunbar website which works in competition to SOLE.

*Well, if you just look at the website. If you look at the website and the content and then through other organisations, know how many businesses there are, how many shops there are, how many hotels there are, how many community groups there are.*

**Local Community Member**

### ***70% of businesses to have claimed their profile and customised their listing***

This KPI has not been met and at the time of research the SOLE team were deepening business engagement which may have the impact of increasing the number of claimed profiles.

#### *Review of KPI data*

Data was provided by listing organisations that have claimed their profile and are visible on the platform – the total across the county is 529, approximately 37% of the total in the SOLE database (approximately 44% of the total estimated from the ELC database). Performance on this KPI is highest in Dunbar (61% of businesses in this region have claimed their profile) and lowest in Fa'side (26% of businesses).

The outcome is lower than the KPI and STA gave a number of reasons that are yet to be fully investigated by them. The reasons given are listed below:

- Some initial hesitation on the part of businesses because the platform was new and still relatively unproven – a number waited to see how citizen adoption of the platform went before committing.
- Some of the businesses with existing well-developed online presences were reluctant to adopt an active presence on SOLE – the platform allows business owners to use their profile on SOLE to attract interest and direct users of the platform out to their business' own website and STA continues to encourage them to do this.
- The primary focus for business recruitment was over the summer months while the full team of six Community Engagement Specialists was in post. From the end of August, STA and SOLE colleagues took a deliberate decision to focus on deepening engagement of businesses that had come onboard rather than trying to recruit more numbers as an end in itself. This reflects the STA's overall approach to longevity of the SOLE platform: for the platform to become well-embedded and sustainable long-term, it was thought important to move from early adoption/enrolment, to augmenting engagement (of existing users), to virality (by which existing, engaged users promote the service to others). The focus from September to December, with the Community Engagement team scaled back, was to deepen engagement. STA claimed that numbers of businesses with claimed profiles and users on the site has continued to grow over this period but at a slower rate. The focus for STA moving into 2023 will be to focus on tactics to encourage virality in order to achieve the KPI target.

STA recognised that many businesses had little experience in building a digital presence and so put a customer success team of six in place specifically to help businesses claim their profiles. The initiatives included in person workshops and remote support. At the point of research STA were in the second phase of engagement which was centred around deepening business engagement which should have the impact of increasing the number of claimed profiles.

#### *Qualitative research with stakeholders*

Another point identified in the qualitative research to some businesses who resisted claiming a profile was that initially the project was designed to create online sales to support local businesses during the period of the covid pandemic but post-lockdown businesses would rather have footfall on the streets and the site isn't well suited to supporting that.

*I was very concerned about it from the starting point because it's a digital platform and what I believe we wanted was footfall in the High Street, and this was being pushed as a digital marketplace, and as I could understand from XXX and lots of other traders in the town and myself included, that it was hard to see how it would work for people because most people who wanted to sell online, were already doing so through other platforms.*

**Business**

A few argued against the long term viability of the website arguing that while it was free at this point businesses would sign up to it but after the three year starter funding is gone the website will no longer be viable as there will be no one to run it. Another reason given for not claiming and customising profiles, identified in the qualitative research, was that it fails to promote individual areas well enough and that its purpose is to promote SOLE.

*The whole platform is designed to promote SOLE the brand. So if you look at the homepage, which is not eye catching, it's not interesting, it's all about SOLE.scot,*

**Business**

Some smaller businesses that were operating out of their homes were very complimentary about SOLE and found that it gave their businesses legitimacy. It was described as inclusive and accessible. Some had claimed their profiles and launched the special offer of 20% off with great success. Others found the site useful for networking opportunities.

*I loved fact it was open to all types of businesses (e.g., don't need a physical shopfront) – this felt inclusive/accessible which should be the whole ethos around this kind of community projects. Linked to this, I felt like I didn't fit in when I had previously linked in with business partnerships (e.g., Musselburgh Partnership) – as they were mainly focused on the high street/improving footfall.*

**Business**

A few who were in favour of SOLE commented that while they were keen to update and individualise their profile the site was clunky to use.

*I operate from a residential area...People only know about me if they go on my website or see me on social media or someone shares it. So, I am looking for as many places as possible to be listed. I am aware of their budget, their budgets are small, so I know I am going to have to do a bit more work compared to an Amazon listing or some of the big boys where it's a super easy interface but yeah it is a bit clunky.*

**Business**

### **30% of businesses to have a shop on the platform**

This KPI has not been met due to many seeing the SOLE platform as a promotional tool rather than for online sales.

#### Review of KPI data

STA has reported that getting businesses to set up ecommerce listings on profiles has proved to be the most challenging aspect of the project. At mid-December 2022, 13 businesses had shops live on the platform, around 2.5% of the businesses that had claimed their profile and around 1% of the total of businesses in the database.

A further seven businesses have committed to activating shops on their profile and the Community Engagement and Customer Success teams are working with them to achieve this.

There has been greater willingness amongst businesses to use the platform for promotion of special offers. At the time of running off the KPI data, 38 businesses had used SOLE to promote special offers and a further 30 have offers due to go live on future dates on the platform.

Taking all those businesses that have active shops, pending shops, or offers activated or pending gives a total of 89 businesses that have used or are in the process of setting up to use the SOLE platform to promote and grow their business – this corresponds to approximately 17% of the businesses that have claimed their profile.

One factor contributing to the low take-up here is that many of the more established independent businesses on the platform already have an online shopping presence (e.g., Shopify), or they can/have to rely solely on in-person sales (e.g., hairdressers, restaurants, cafes) and are using SOLE as a business promotion tool.

#### Quantitative research with businesses and other organisations

The survey conducted online suggests that of those who were on the SOLE platform just under one in ten said they conducted e-commerce through SOLE. The main reasons for not doing so were given as being not applicable and already having e-commerce in place.

**Chart 2: Incidence of e-commerce**



**Low base number**

**Base: all who appear on SOLE platform = (54)**

### Qualitative research with stakeholders

Some business owners claimed that the commerce side of the site is not what they are interested in and that they wanted promotion and increased footfall to be a result of their participation. Others who are in favour of e-commerce claimed that the percentage of profits (reportedly 20%) was too much to pay in commission of sales and they would rather the SOLE site drove traffic to their own websites for sales.

## **Purpose**

This serves to illustrate the confusion that was apparent with regard to the purpose of SOLE. Some saw it as a way to invigorate the high street by advertising and marketing the towns. Other saw it as an antidote to COVID lockdown [and loss of footfall on the high street] and to drive custom online. Some saw it as a platform to strengthen community ties between businesses in their area. Some of the SOLE team saw it as a way to compete with global online vendors such as Amazon. Some said it was intended to give a digital profile for business who had not adopted an online presence.

*low-barrier access to the digital world for businesses*

A few said it was designed with business in mind and was less well suited to community groups who do not trade.

*The ones who are probably engaging with it most are the home-based businesses, the really micro-businesses who are looking for a route to something. It's not originally what we were focused on; we were thinking about towns and high-streets, but it's the person that's doing the by-mail order and they would like to be online... [SOLE] is therefore a really good way of becoming known locally; it's really hard to market yourself and cut through to people.*

**Stakeholder**

*SOLE raises awareness for businesses of why people should shop with them and what their business is all about. Giving them somewhere to showcase their business. We also provide finance for people too, so we gave £100 to a businesses to put offers on their shop products up on the platform and it meant she got 10 new customers through this offer. Makes such a difference to a small business.*

**SOLE**



### ***70% of community groups to have claimed their profiles***

This KPI has not been met largely due to there not being a comprehensive database that can be used confidently for reference/comparison purposes, coupled with issues around definitions of community groups which may not be consistent.

#### *Review of KPI data*

Data collection for the project identified 431 community organisations across the local authority in total. Gauging the completeness of this data set is difficult as, unlike the East Lothian Council businesses database, there is not a comprehensive database that can be used confidently for reference/comparison purposes, coupled with issues around definitions of community groups which may not be consistent.

The organisations in the SOLE database were identified by STA as community organisations by manual review of data scraped from a variety of online sources. While the definitions of a community group are unlikely to be the same, an estimate of numbers can be obtained from the ALISS (A Local Information Source for Scotland) database – this is a database funded by Scottish Government, described on the website as “a national digital programme enabling people and professionals to find and share information on resources, services, groups, and support in their local communities and online.” Entering a search query of East Lothian into the ALISS web site returns 530 results – with the caveats noted above, STA have concluded this suggests the SOLE database of community organisations is reasonably comprehensive.

The decision not to show information about businesses without their explicit consent was also taken with community groups.

Of the community organisations in the SOLE database, 179 had claimed their profile and were visible on SOLE at the time of sampling (in December 2022). This corresponds to around 42% of the total, still short of the 70% KPI target. There were marked differences between wards, with four in five (82%) community groups in Dunbar represented on the platform compared with 31% in North Berwick.

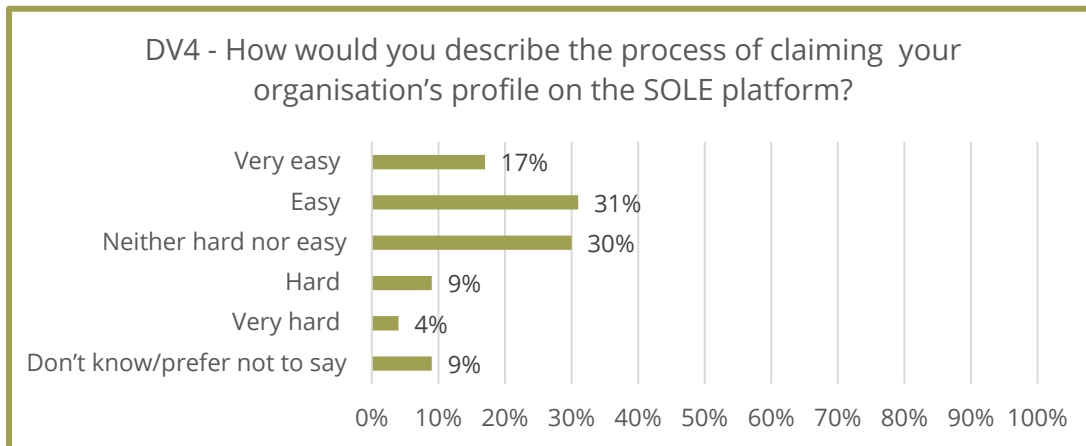
As noted with businesses, the number of community organisations with profiles claimed was still growing and (at the time of research) the SOLE team continuing to work on encouraging more community organisations to regularly use the platform (to update users about news/meetings/events etc.).

#### *Quantitative research with businesses and other organisations*

When asked in the survey *How would you describe the process of claiming your profile*, nearly half said very easy or easy, nearly a third thought neither easy nor hard and approximately one in eight said hard or very hard.

This suggests the issue is not a technical one but due to other factors.

**Chart 3: Ease of claiming profile**



**Low base number**

**Base: all who appear on SOLE platform = (54)**

***Two community posts per section (e.g. news, offers, what's on and community) per week***

This KPI has been exceeded. Across the 28-week period since the platform was launched to the public at the beginning of June, there has been a total of 1,125 posts – at a high level, two posts per ward per week across 28 weeks would equate to a total of 336 posts.

***Review of KPI data***

Data was extracted directly from the SOLE database to assess this KPI. Since Week 22 (i.e., the full launch of SOLE in June 2022), all of the wards have had at least two, and in many cases more than two, new posts per week. Post topics include a range of things happening in the local wards, from commercial building repairs to notifications about ticketed events.

Across the 28-week period since the platform was launched to the public at the beginning of June, there has been a total of 1,125 posts – at a high level, two posts per ward per week across 28 weeks would equate to a total of 336 posts. Activity by ward is fairly consistent, ranging from a low of 145 posts in Preston, Seton and Gosford (13%) to a high of 232 posts in Dunbar (21%).

In addition, there have been 536 event listings added to the site since June 2022. Dunbar and Musselburgh have seen the most activity (117 and 114 event listings, respectively) and Fa'side has seen the least (59).

***Qualitative research with stakeholders***

A few respondents to the qualitative element of research noted that the community posts were scraped from other sources such as Edinburgh live, the Courier and re-posts from Facebook that bore little relevance to the area.

*The news is well, there's more on Our Dunbar, you know, Dunbar Community Council Facebook page than what they're doing across the county. Because all they're doing is pulling from the Courier or other people's pages.*

**Local Community Member**

***2,000 unique hits per month (per community) on the platform that lasted longer than 30 seconds***

It was not possible to determine if this KPI has been met. Distribution of hits over time is uneven, there are challenges with the data and it appears that engagement has decreased over time.

#### Review of KPI data

The nature of the reporting from the mobile app, based on the reporting from Firebase, does not show page views by town – this data is available for the web platform.

STA took data from the web platform which shows a total of 36,662 views across the platform overall – across a 6-month period, this equates to 6,110 views per month, but the distribution of views is uneven over time – the busiest period was the first three months when event activity was high, and the SOLE team was fully staffed. September and October were significantly quieter and activity levels increased again in November and December. Further, the distribution of views is uneven across the towns, with Dunbar and North Berwick the highest and others lower.

Given the issues with the mobile data mentioned above, and additional challenges associated with the data (for instance, inclusion of some hits <30 seconds long), it's not possible to determine whether the target was hit each month. What the data suggests, is that user engagement appears to have decreased over time, and it tends to reflect engagement by businesses in each ward (with performance strongest in North Berwick and Dunbar). Indeed, these are the two wards where most businesses have claimed their profile.

**App downloads - 10,000 downloads in one year**

This KPI has not been met and, as stated by STA, is unlikely to be met.

Review of KPI data

The mobile apps (iOS and Android) were launched to the public at the beginning of June 2022. Data was obtained from the Apple and Google app stores, counting first-time downloads only. This shows that app download activity grew strongly from the date of launch, with the maximum rate of growth taking place over July and August – this corresponds to the period when the SOLE team was fully staffed and the peak of the summer events season when the team was present and active at a large number of events.

After six months of the app being live, the total number of downloads was over 3,000 (December 2022). STA claimed that even with a focused effort from remaining staff working on SOLE to increase the ‘virality’ of SOLE, and ongoing marketing of the platform, it is unlikely that this KPI will be reached at this stage – particularly as engagement with a new product or service is typically highest around the launch date.

**Referral business to businesses’ own websites clearly attributable to SOLE Scotland**

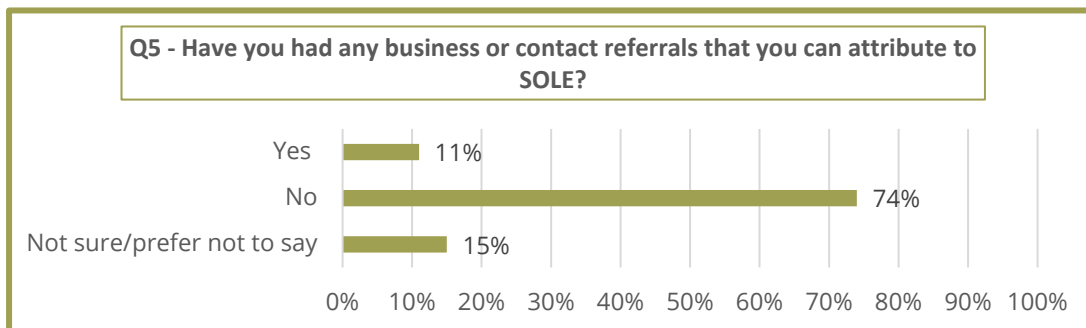
This KPI appears to have been met but the base numbers of the sample are very low and data should be treated with extreme caution. Moreover there is no target for levels of referral.

Quantitative research with businesses and other organisations

Analysis of the business survey results would suggest that SOLE has had an effect on organisations’ referrals to their own website. As detailed in the charts below, around one in 10 (11%) reported that they had received business or contact referrals that they can directly attribute to SOLE, although the significance of referral(s) to the organisation was mixed.

Please note, due to low base sizes, all findings should be treated with extreme caution.

**Chart 4: Number of referrals**



**Low base number**

**Base: all who appear on SOLE platform = (54)**

Of the six respondents who could attribute business referrals to SOLE, three said these referrals had been significant to their organisation, while two said they had been very insignificant, (the other said neither).

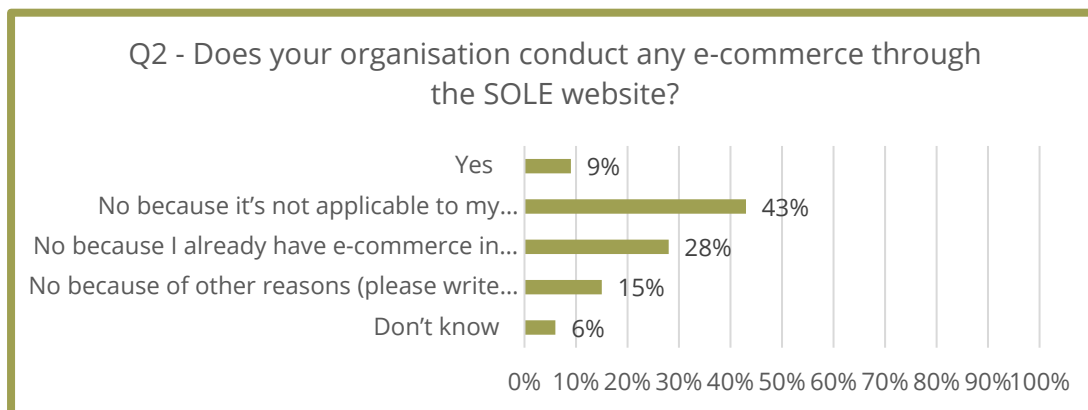
#### **Sales - Online conversion rate of at least 2%**

This KPI appears to have been met although the numbers should be treated with extreme caution because of the very low base number of responses.

#### Quantitative research with businesses and other organisations

When asked whether their organisation conducts ecommerce through the SOLE platform, around one in 10 (9%) reported they had. However, it was more common for organisations to report that ecommerce was not applicable to their type of business (43%) or that they already have an ecommerce operation (28%).

#### **Chart 5: E-commerce**



**Very low base number**

**Base: all who appear on SOLE= 54**

### **The pilot in Dunbar**

#### Qualitative research with stakeholders

While this evaluation did not include consideration of the Dunbar pilot, the subject came up spontaneously with some respondents who felt compelled to convey their disagreement with a project that was funded on the basis of the pilot being a success. A few who took part in the qualitative element of research were very sceptical about the success of the pilot in Dunbar and as a result why the money from the levelling up fund was therefore awarded to SOLE. Some felt that the SOLE project was foisted on Dunbar and that trade associations and traders' views have been ignored. Others felt that the funding for the SOLE project was excessive and not spent effectively. Strength of feelings ran high with a few who regarded the SOLE project as being of no benefit to the communities it purports to support and of having no sustainable future in face of other major online retail organisations.

It should be noted that STA recognise the pilot was not as effective as hoped. The reasons given for this include working with volunteers rather than paid staff (as would be the case for the main project)

and no budget for marketing. Consequently, the pilot did not give a reflection of the SOLE site as it currently is. STA recognise that the pilot has impacted on their continued engagement with Local Area Partnership and trade associations in Dunbar. A representative from a Local Area Partnership claimed the failed pilot had sent a ripple of negativity throughout East Lothian.

*Department of Levelling Up gave the half million, you know. I think based from what we found out from the FOI, that it was based on a successful pilot in Dunbar and it wasn't. You know, where was the checks and balances, the due diligence, by the Department of Levelling Up and giving that half million, because they didn't check with the people, the people in the community about how that pilot had gone?*

**Local Community Member**

*The funding was provided on the basis of a successful pilot, which it just wasn't. Very, very strong feelings from our area, myself included, that it was not a successful pilot. It was absolutely awful, underline awful. Any feedback that was given at the time to the Scottish Tech Army was not, I mean, really not listened to and not implemented.*

**Business**

*I think we were very frustrated because we did trial it, none of our feedback was listened to by either East Lothian Council or STA. It was not successful by any stretch of the imagination and yet, they got nearly certainly 450, if not more, thousand pounds, to put together something that they have thrown money at, but still is not as good as it should have been, for the money. All that money I think very, very little has been seen in our area.*

**Business**

It is important to recognise that the STA recognise the lack of success in the pilot and attribute this to a lack of funding to properly launch the site. It should be noted that the website as it is today differs to that trailed in the pilot.

## **Benefits of SOLE**

### Qualitative research with stakeholders

In-depth interviews identified one of benefits being the promotions (20% off) that ran on SOLE. Some commented that SOLE has benefitted some business who didn't have a website by getting them an online presence.

*As a small, hobby business, set up with no capital... we don't have money to invest in technology, websites, things like that, but we now have an online presence which, without SOLE, we just wouldn't have.*

**Business**

Evaluating the outcome of SOLE final report

One respondent claimed that it would be useful to have metric on the SOLE site showing how many businesses are signed up and the business it had generated.

Another commented that one of the main benefits of SOLE is in reaching an audience that has a different profile to that of her local area. Some saw it as being of benefit to areas that don't already have websites. Others saw benefits to community events.

*For me personally, the typical demographic for Musselburgh and the Musselburgh High Street doesn't necessarily lend itself to [my business]. They are more likely to just go into B&M and buy it from there. North Berwick, however, would be a much better demographic.*

**Business**

*At the end of the day, SOLE gave another presence to the town, to Dunbar – the good was there, without a doubt.*

**Business**

*I don't think it's bringing in the footfall that they originally hoped for and predicted. I see it being more valuable to the areas like Haddington and North Berwick – that didn't have their own website... so to get a website without having to pay for it is a huge bonus. I think that's where the concentration needs to be [in towns without this support].*

**Business**

*I also ran the East Lothian Walking festival this year and SOLE were good with it, they retweeted it and helped get the message out there, because I literally ran out of time to make a profile on it. There's all this opportunity for people to improve their business or organisation but unless you have that breathing space to do it or someone is prodding you with a cattle prod, it just doesn't get done.*

**Local Community Member**

When members of the SOLE team were asked about the benefits of the website the following were mentioned:

- Making people aware of what is available in their area
- Supporting local events/ promoting local events/ helping to make them a success
- Giving a one stop shop and access to a range of businesses
- Useful to people who have recently moved to the area and don't know what is available
- Informing people of what is happening in the area
- Supporting the local economy

*I think the positive has been the model that the STA put forward to UK Government in their funding application. Guaranteeing the platform for three years, so it's long enough to look at how much impact it's had... Where we're at, at the end of year three, that's the real acid test.*

**ELC**

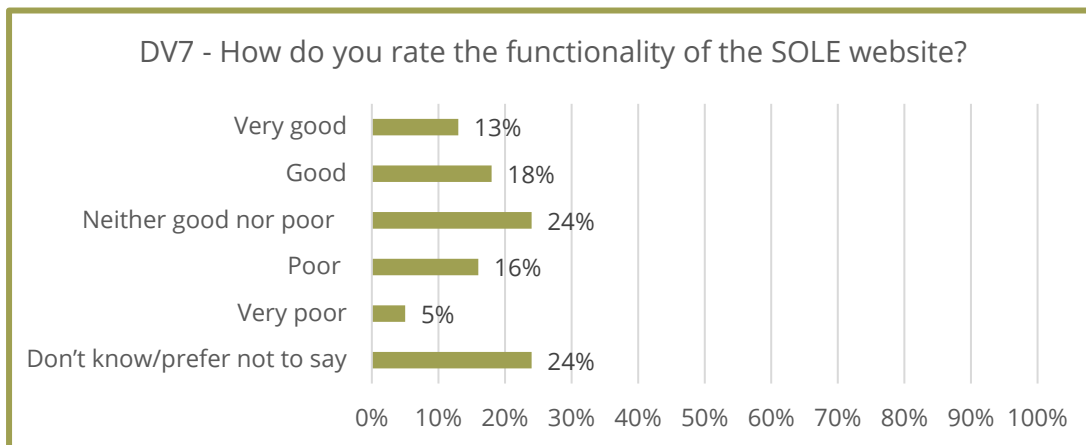
At every SOLE event that I've been to, there is a real sense of community – everyone wanting to support local businesses... There is an appetite for knowing how to support locally – people generally think it is such a good idea... there is a real community will for this project

SOLE

### Quantitative research with businesses and other organisations

When asked in the survey How would you rate the functionality of the SOLE website nearly a third said very good or good. One in four said neither good not bad, approximately one in five said poor or very poor. See table below:

**Chart 6: Functionality**



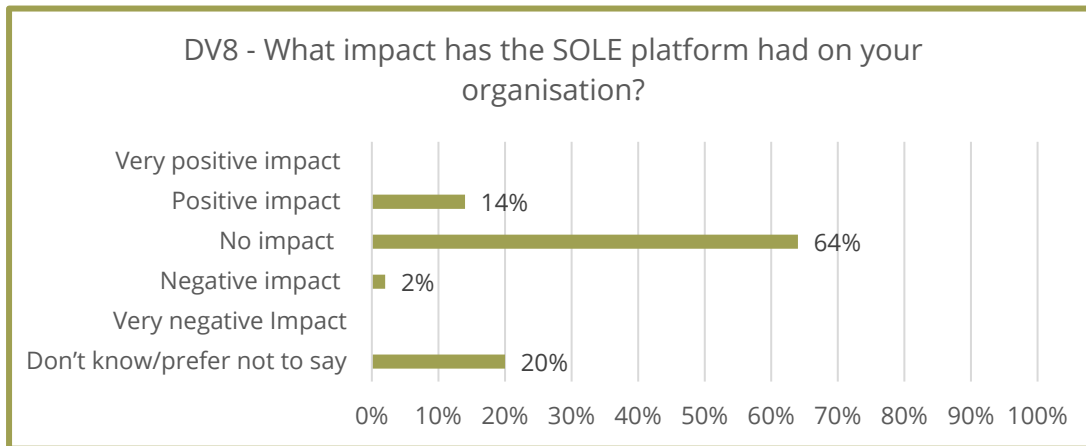
**Very low base number**

**Base: total sample = (87)**

When asked in the survey *What impact has the SOLE platform had on your organisation* the majority said no impact. See table below:



**Chart 7: Impact on organisation**

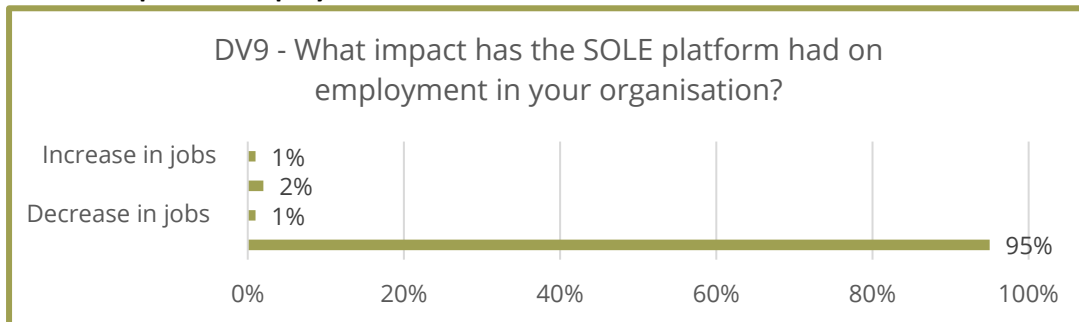


**Very low base number**

**Base: total sample = (87)**

When asked in the survey *What impact has the SOLE platform had on employment in your organisation* the majority said no impact. See table below:

**Chart 8: Impact on employment**

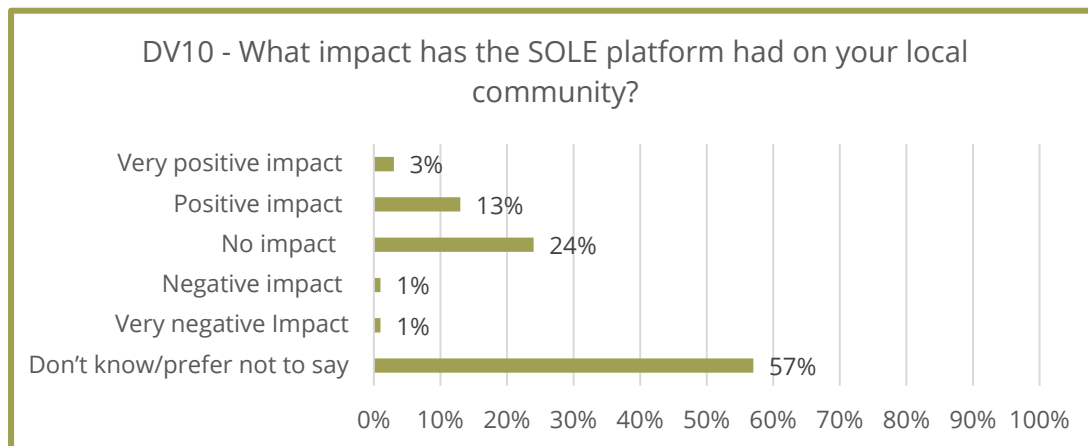


**Low base number**

**Base: total sample = (87)**

When asked in the survey *What impact has the SOLE platform had on your local community* the majority said no impact. See table below:

**Chart 9: Impact on local community**



**Low base number**

**Base: total sample = (87)**

## Community liaison, marketing and training

### Qualitative research with stakeholders

Many businesses commented on the importance of the personal touch and having one to one meetings with SOLE representatives. These meetings were thought to be educative and supportive and created high levels of engagement.

Representatives from SOLE adopted a comprehensive support system for all by reaching out to business not just in the main towns and highstreets but in outlying areas as well. This way hotels and guest house and similar types of business were included in the programme.

All members of the SOLE team were highly enthusiastic about the project and see it as being of great benefit to the community. Their enthusiasm transfers to many of those they have engaged with and who took part in this research. Members of the SOLE team reported putting a lot of effort into engaging with local organisations and claim their work is paying off and it is a matter of time before they hit critical mass. The community engagement work has included one to one meetings as well as advertising on local radio, press and out of home.

*I think we've still got some work to do to reach out to communities. We've done a radio show with Radio Saltire to tell people what SOLE is and how they can get involved. We're due to reach out to East Coast FM, too... there's also lots of word of mouth, as people on the platform tell their friends, family, other businesses... but the work never ends; there's so many more groups and businesses we haven't been able to contact yet – and that's our focus going forward.*

**SOLE**

*There's a big will locally [from the local community] to support businesses, particularly post-pandemic, and SOLE's a platform to help achieve that, because local people know what's there, locally.*

**SOLE**

*My first thoughts were 'wow, Eat Lothian needs this.' We need... something that people can go onto and find out about what's happening in their local area... Lots of new houses in the area, no one knows where to get anything – in terms of a plumber, or children's groups or whatever.*

**SOLE**

*All the elements of it seemed perfect, I had no intentions of continuing with marketing...I was so caught up in their enthusiasm and this genuine feeling that they wanted to help and they were there for good. Rather than every other company and organisation I have worked for, it's always been about how much can we make and not doing the best for the people and the customers. And suddenly there was this organisation that was there for all the right reasons*

**SOLE**

As enthusiastic and effective as the SOLE representatives are we saw evidence from one respondent that there is not enough resource to properly promote the SOLE site.

*The only concern from a business perspective is that I had heard about it from a consumer perspective several months ago, downloaded the App, and then I've heard nothing about it since... so I did wonder if it is being advertised [to consumers only].*

**Business**

A few business owners expressed frustration at the lack of response to questions about long term sustainability for the website and future monetisation. Some mentioned a lack of marketing and the need to promote the site more.

The training to use the site and set up business profiles was described by many as really helpful. This was delivered by SOLE representatives in a personal or virtual way. Those who received training were highly complimentary of it. At the time of research SOLE representatives confirmed that they were concentrating on deepening users' experience and engagement with SOLE rather than looking for new users. Technical support and training on the website were being delivered in person in small groups as well as one to one over the phone and online.

## Longevity of SOLE

### Qualitative research with stakeholders

A few businesses expressed high levels of enthusiasm for SOLE which was tempered for some by the delayed launch and unanswered question about the long-term funding of SOLE. Others commented that the activities by SOLE seem very “one off” and that they are unaware of any long-term strategy or resource to continue to grow it.

*We could never find out what the long-term plan was [during the plot phase] and the big concern was [for SOLE], you know, once this funding runs out, what happens to the website. Does it become something that people have to pay for... East Lothian Council do not have the funding ad infinitum run a website. No one ever came back to us on that one.*

**Business**

Some businesses commented that the longevity of SOLE is predicated on it being free and that as soon as they have to pay for it, unless they see very tangible benefits, they are unlikely to sign up long term.

A comment expressed by members of the project’s team and some partners was that to be really successful and successfully compete with other online platform (Amazon was given as an example) the SOLE project will require big behaviour changes both in consumers and businesses in East Lothian.

*We were wholly positive about it... [But] the things that needed to be ironed out was always around the viability of something like this [SOLE] in that it's very easy to build a technology solution; it's very easy to build a platform and expect people to use it... but what's the thing that gets people using it; what's the thing that's, sort of, the behaviour change, because people have become quite embedded in the way that they do online shopping.*

**Stakeholder**

Representatives from SOLE were very positive about the long-term success of the website. Some thought the long-term success depended on future funding for marketing and promotion. One of the challenges for the future identified by one SOLE representative was in getting the local community to take on the management of the website. This is linked to the challenge of organisations in East Lothian seeing it as more than just a free listing on a website and as a community asset that they are highly engaged with and want to maintain.

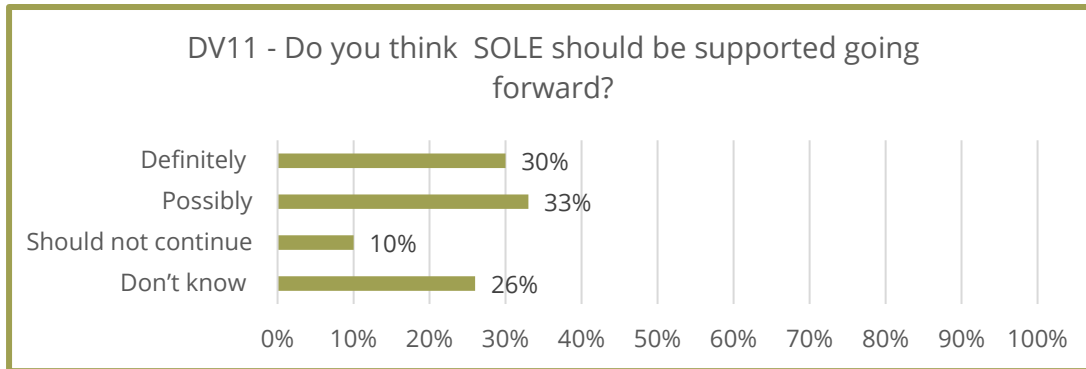
*It's not as simple as a community group adding things on the platform... it requires editorial thought.*

**SOLE**

Quantitative research with businesses and other organisations

When asked in the survey *Do you think SOLE should be supported going forward?* The majority opined in the positive. One in ten said no. See chart below:

**Chart 10: Support going forward**



**Very low base number**

**Base: total sample = 87**

# Conclusions

- A review of the KPIs as the data currently stands shows that only one of them has been met with certainty and this relates to the number of community posts made on the SOLE website.
- 100% of local independent businesses on the platform with an information only listing. Unmet.
  - Businesses were unhappy about having their details published on the site without their permissions and so as a consequence the decision was made not to do so.
- 70% of businesses to have claimed their profile and customised their listing
  - Local organisations have been slow to adopt and customise their profile. As a consequence, SOLE has changed its strategy from broadening contact with businesses to deepening the contact with those who already engage with SOLE.
- 30% of businesses to have a shop on the platform
  - There has been a far greater willingness on behalf of businesses to use the SOLE website as a promotional tool rather than an online sales platform. Therefore this KPI has not been met.
- 70% of community groups to have claimed their profiles
  - The same decision was made not to show information and community groups without their explicit consent. At the time of research around 42% of the total had claimed their profiles.
- Two community posts per section (e.g. news, offers, what's on and community) per week
  - This KPI has been exceeded.
- 2,000 unique hits per month (per community) on the platform that lasted longer than 30 seconds
  - It was not possible to determine if this KPI has been met
- App downloads - 10,000 downloads in one year
  - This KPI has not been met and, as stated by STA, is unlikely to be met.
- Referral business to businesses' own websites clearly attributable to SOLE Scotland
  - Responses to the online survey were too low to determine this with any certainty.
- Sales - Online conversion rate of at least 2%
  - Responses to the online survey were too low to determine this with any certainty.
- There were issues with the pilot in Dunbar not being effective. This has caused disaffection with some businesses in that area. STA recognised this and claim this was due to not having the right resources to promote and develop the site at that time. Moreover, the SOLE site has been substantially developed from that used in the pilot.
- The businesses that took part in the qualitative research were on the whole very positive about SOLE as were members of the SOLE team. The largest groups of those who took part in the survey were positive about the SOLE website.

- The community liaison team at SOLE have been successful at creating engagements with local organisations. There was a strategy at the time of evaluation to work on deepening connections rather than broadening them to a wider community.
- Members of SOLE were very positive about the long-term success of the website and the majority of those who took part in the survey were in favour of its being supported in the future.

# Appendices

## 1: Initial briefing meeting with STA outcome



10928 - SOLE -  
Briefing Meeting wi

## 2: Inception meeting outcome STA and ELC



10928 - SOLE -  
Briefing Meeting wi

## 3: Topic guide used in qualitative stage of research



10928 - Sole  
Evaluation - Topic G

## 4: B2B questionnaire used in quantitative survey



10928 - SOLE  
Scotland B2B Questi

## 5: Results from B2B survey



10928 - Results B2B  
survey.xlsx

## 6: Technical appendix

### **Quantitative**

1. The data was collected using an online survey
2. The target group for this research study was businesses and community organisations in East Lothian
3. The sample type was probability  
– *All organisations on the ELC and STA database were invited to participate in the online survey*
4. The final achieved sample size 87 online interviews.
5. Online fieldwork was undertaken from November 22<sup>nd</sup> to December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022
6. All persons on the sampling frame were invited to participate in the study. Respondents to paper and internet self-completion studies are self-selecting and complete the survey without the assistance of a trained interviewer. This means that Progressive cannot strictly control sampling and in some cases, this can lead to findings skewed towards the views of those motivated to respond to the survey.
7. The questionnaire took around 4 minutes to complete.



8. Data gathered using self-completion methodologies was validated using the following techniques:
  - Where a self-completion survey is returned anonymously there will not be any opportunity for validation. However, all questionnaires returned undergo rigorous editing and quality checks and any thought to be invalid were removed from further processing.
9. All research projects undertaken by Progressive comply fully with the requirements of ISO 20252, the GDPR and the MRS Code of Conduct.

#### Data processing and analysis

10. The overall sample size of 87 provides a dataset with a margin of error of between  $\pm 2.10\%$ , and  $\pm 10.51\%$  and calculated at the 95% confidence level (market research industry standard).
11. The data processing department undertakes a number of quality checks on the data to ensure its validity and integrity. These checks include:
  - All questionnaires are checked manually for completeness and sense. Any errors or omissions detected at this stage are referred back to the field department, who are required to re-contact respondents to check and, if necessary, correct the data.
  - Data is entered into the analysis package, SNAP, which includes facilities for the verification of punched data (e.g. double data entry). A minimum of 5% verification of punched data will be undertaken.
  - For **online** questionnaires these checks include:
    - Responses are checked for duplicates where unidentified responses have been permitted.
    - All responses are checked for completeness and sense.
    - Specific quality checks to be conducted during fieldwork may include checking speed of completion, responses in patterns/flat-lining, contradictory answers, quality of open ended responses etc.
12. A computer edit of the data carried out prior to analysis involves both range and inter-field checks. Any further inconsistencies identified at this stage are investigated by reference back to the raw data on the questionnaire.
13. Where 'other' type questions are used, the responses to these are checked against the parent question for possible up-coding.
14. Responses to open-ended questions will normally be spell and sense checked. Where required these responses may be grouped using a code-frame which can be used in analysis.
15. A SNAP programme was set up with the aim of providing the client with useable and comprehensive data.

#### **Qualitative**

1. The data was collected by depth interviews.
2. The target group for this research study was businesses and community organisations in East Lothian as well as project stakeholders.
3. The sampling frame used for this study was a listing provided by the client.
4. In total, 16 group depth interviews were undertaken.
5. Fieldwork was undertaken during November and December 2022.
6. In total, 3 moderators were involved in the fieldwork for this project.
7. All research projects undertaken by Progressive comply fully with the requirements of ISO 20252, the GDPR and the MRS Code of Conduct.