

REPORT TITLE: DRIVING AGRITECH INNOVATION: WINCHESTER CITY  
COUNCIL'S GRANT-FUNDED PARTNERSHIP WITH SPARSHOLT

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WARD(S): ALL

PURPOSE

This report provides a summary of the grant application we have made as lead partner to the Government Department of Science, Innovation & Technology for the Digital Innovation Inclusion Fund for £223,850.

It highlights the work the council has undertaken to develop the proposals in partnership with Sparsholt College, and others, to a stage where we have been able to make an application for funding. The importance of the rural economy and agriculture is recognised in the council's Green Economic Development Strategy, and this initiative has come about because of the council's investment in supporting this key sector for the district.

To meet our aim of co-ordinating innovation and knowledge-sharing in the rural and land-based economy this programme will equip farmers, land-based workers and agricultural students with advanced digital skills to improve crop yields through smarter resource management and precision farming. In turn we will drive productivity gains that support long-term economic development across the district's rural economy.

If awarded, the grant will deliver digital skills to both aspiring agricultural professionals and seasoned farmers by providing state-of-the-art equipment and hands-on training, especially those with limited resources. The programme directly tackles digital poverty in rural communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Note the summary detail of the Digital Inclusion Innovation fund grant bid outlined below.
2. Subject to a successful grant application, approve the following budgets and expenditure totalling £223,850:
  - A capital grant to Sparsholt college of up to £144,542
  - A revenue grant to Sparsholt college of up to £42,000
  - A one-off administration budget of £37,308 to be funded by the grant received
3. Delegate authority to Corporate Head of Economy and Community to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the government Department of Science, Innovation & Technology
4. Delegate authority to Corporate Head of Economy and Community to enter into a grant agreement with Sparsholt College to deliver the programme.

IMPLICATIONS:1 COUNCIL PLAN OUTCOME

Greener Faster.

- 1.1 The programme is a catalyst for economic resilience, environmental responsibility, and social equity in Winchester's rural communities. The project outcomes support the council plan outcome for the district to be carbon neutral by 2030.
- 1.2 It aligns with the council's Green Economic Development Strategy (GEDS) action plan in terms of tackling digital inequalities.
- 1.3 The training equips farmers with tools to monitor and reduce environmental impact. This will be useful if they then go on to apply for the council's low-carbon assessments and green business audits. By enabling smarter resource management reducing inefficiencies and reducing emissions from agriculture, the programme contributes to the Council's Carbon Neutrality Action Plan.
- 1.4 It supports the council's role in influencing and collaborating with landowners, land managers, farmers, groups, charities, partnerships. Similar examples of this include the Meon Valley Partnership, the East Hants Catchment Partnership and the Test and Itchen Partnership, along with environmental stewardship ambitions for rural areas as outlined in the council's Nature Improvement Plan. It also complements other efforts like the DEFRA test and trial initiative on Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS).
- 1.5 Improved skills and training enable the adoption of precision farming, optimising land use and reducing resource waste, contributing to biodiversity protection and sustainable land management.

Thriving Places

- 1.6 The council has provided strategic vision and combined with Sparsholt's educational expertise, will develop a programme that will strengthen productivity, sustainability, and innovation in the rural economy. Winchester City Council has taken a leading role in supporting this proposed Agri-Tech initiative, having led its design, stakeholder engagement, and funding application.
- 1.7 This programme contributes directly to the council plan aim to work with further and higher education, alongside local businesses, to support skills and enable research and knowledge transfer. It also supports the outcome of strong, sustainable business growth.
- 1.8 It will provide the necessary skills to enable adoption of precision farming, using satellite data and remote sensing technologies, that will boost productivity and profitability by:

- a) increasing yields through data driven decisions
- b) reducing input costs
- c) improving market readiness and traceability

It will strengthen the viability of small and medium farms wishing to embrace digital innovation in agriculture, a key sector in the Winchester district. It enables young people to work in the district by tackling digital exclusion in rural communities, ensuring farmers and students; especially those with limited access and opportunity, to gain the digital skills needed for modern, sustainable farming.

### Learning

- 1.9 This supports the council's commitment to inclusive green growth, ensuring that no community is left behind in the transition to a low-carbon economy
- 1.10 This initiative was developed by Winchester City Council as part of its ongoing efforts to support innovation and promote digital inclusion within the rural economy. To help strengthen community connections and raise awareness, the Council will aim to keep residents, stakeholders, and the wider public informed about the project and how it relates to Winchester.
- 1.11 Individual farmers across the district were consulted through surveys, farm visits, and community forums. These conversations provided real-world context of the day-to-day realities of farming across the district. Many expressed enthusiasms for collaborating with students and welcomed the opportunity to trial new technologies. Their openness and insights have shaped the programme into a truly collaborative approach that reflects the needs, aspirations, and ingenuity of Winchester's agricultural community.

## 2 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 2.1 A bid has been submitted to the Government's Digital Innovation Inclusion fund for a grant of £223,850. If approved and subject to signed grant agreements, the council will be required to invoice for activities taken place up to and including 16 January 2026 and then again on 30 April 2026. All funded activities must be concluded by 31 March 2026. Central government reserves the right to withhold final payment to the council until final reporting and payment is completed.
- 2.2 In addition to the above bid Sparsholt College will be directly providing match funding of £37,000, making the value of the overall project at £260,850.
- 2.3 Funding is provided under a formal grant agreement between the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and the council. Payments will be contingent on the council's compliance with monitoring requirements, achievement of agreed milestones and satisfactory progress reporting.

- 2.4 The council will require its delivery partner, Sparsholt College, to invoice for reimbursement of costs relating to capital expenditure and programme delivery in line with central governments instalment plan. This ensures accountability and encourages efficient use of resources.
- 2.5 It is proposed to use the 20% administration allocation to ensure the council fulfils its obligations as lead authority. It will support the productive delivery and administration of the grant by providing resources within the Economy & Community service, Procurement Finance and Legal teams to administer and manage the programme.

### 3 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 As lead authority the council is obliged to commit to a formal grant agreement with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). This will establish:
  - a) The council as Lead Authority with responsibility for oversight and governance, submission of progress reports and financial claims, along with ensuring compliance with the fund requirements.
  - b) Sparsholt College as delivery partner, responsible for implementation of programme activities
  - c) A clear statement of project objectives and outcomes, aligning with the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund along with a description to the target demographic.
  - d) Funding and financial arrangements, including the instalments plan, reimbursement process and requirements for expenditure evidence.
  - e) Monitoring and reporting including progress update schedule and metrics for evaluating success

### 4 WORKFORCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The bid has been developed and if granted will be delivered within the current resourcing in the economy team. The programme of work will be led by the Economic Development Officer (Green Growth). Other resources can be deployed from within the economy team as required.
- 4.2 The responsibilities of lead authority will be undertaken by this resource which will include the effective and timely delivery of the programme with the council's delivery partner, as set out in the agreement with the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology.
- 4.3 Support from Legal will be required for the council's commitment to a grant agreement with the Government department, and along with Procurement, for the grant agreement with Sparsholt College. Finance support will be required

throughout the life of the programme to support the financial management, monitoring and report between both government and Sparsholt College.

- 4.4 This time spent supporting the programme can be claimed against the 20% administration fee (up to £37,308) allowed by the programme for the lead authority roles of administration and management.

## 5 PROPERTY AND ASSET IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no direct implications for council property or assets. The ownership and ongoing liability for any assets purchased by the programme's participants using grant will remain with the individual recipient.

## 6 CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 6.1 To ensure the success and relevance of the proposed training initiative, Sparsholt College, who has an industry leading reputation for expertise in agricultural education and innovation, were approached for their expertise to co-design the programme. Through a series of planning meetings and curriculum workshops, Sparsholt College faculty helped shape the educational framework, ensuring that the programme aligns with both academic standards and the practical needs of students. Their input has also guided the integration of satellite data and remote sensing technologies into hands-on learning modules, making the training both cutting-edge and accessible.
- 6.2 The council also consulted with Space South Central, a leading technical consortium in satellite and space-based technologies. Their specialists provided critical insights into the capabilities and limitations of remote sensing tools, helping us identify the most appropriate platforms for agricultural use. Space South Central will support training delivery through guest lectures, demonstrations, and access to real-time data streams. This partnership ensures the programme is grounded in the latest technological advancements and remains future proof as the sector evolves.
- 6.3 Engagement with the National Farmers Union (NFU) has been equally vital. The council held targeted consultations with NFU representatives to understand the broader challenges facing farmers across Winchester district, particularly around digital access and sustainability. Their feedback helped refine the programme's objectives to better support profitability and resilience in farming. The NFU has also committed to promoting the initiative through its local networks, helping reach farmers who may benefit most from digital upskilling.
- 6.4 To ensure grassroots relevance, we conducted listening sessions with the three farming clusters in Winchester district each representing a unique mix of land use, crop types, and community priorities. These sessions revealed a strong appetite for innovation but also highlighted barriers such as cost, connectivity, and digital literacy. By incorporating their feedback, a tailored

programme of flexible learning formats, equipment-sharing schemes, and targeted support for digitally excluded participants, has been developed.

## 7 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 The programme working with farmers aims to support them adopt more sustainable and environmentally beneficial practices for example:

- a) Remote sensing enables farmers to monitor soil moisture, crop health, and nutrient levels with precision. This leads to:
  - (i) Reduced water usage through targeted irrigation
  - (ii) Lower fertilizer and pesticide application
  - (iii) Minimised waste and runoff into local ecosystems
  - (iv) Carbon Footprint Reduction
- b) Improving operational efficiency, the programme helps reduce emissions from:
  - (i) Overuse of machinery and fuel
  - (ii) Excessive chemical inputs
  - (iii) Inefficient land use practices
- c) Enhanced biodiversity and soil health
- d) Satellite imagery helps identify areas of land degradation and supports regenerative practices like:
  - (i) Crop rotation and cover cropping
  - (ii) Rewilding marginal lands
  - (iii) Monitoring and protecting habitats within farmland

7.2 This aligns with Winchester City Council's Carbon Neutrality Action Plan, supporting agriculture's role in climate mitigation. These practices contribute to long-term ecosystem health and resilience.

## 8 PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken (Appendix A).

## 9 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 The submission of the grant application does not have any direct implications for data protection. However, if successful, the programme may have implications as they will involve local people, the details of whom may need to be captured, for example enrolling on the training courses. Sparsholt College, the delivery partner will hold individual personal data and as such, as part of the council's role as lead partner, they will be required to demonstrate that they are GDPR compliant in handling and storing such data.

## 10 RISK MANAGEMENT

10.1 The table below considers the risks, mitigation and opportunities related to the bid for funding from the Digital Inclusion & Innovation Fund.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
<p>Financial Exposure: Winchester City Council accountable body to deliver the programme through its partner Sparsholt College</p> <p>DSIT withhold final payment until final reporting is completed</p>	<p>Memorandum of understanding with Sparsholt College including following Winchester City Council's procurement process to procure equipment</p> <p>The council will withhold any payments to third parties until funding has been drawn down.</p> <p>Robust programme management will ensure that DSIT milestones and deadlines are met</p>	<p>£223,850 of additional funding for Winchester District based educational provider and farming community.</p>
<p>Exposure to challenge: other colleges not given opportunity to partner on project</p>	<p>Sparsholt College is unique in its specialist focus for students pursuing careers in rural industries and environmental management. There is no other college within the Winchester District or Hampshire that offers the same level of expertise</p>	<p>This project would further enhance Sparsholt and local farmers expertise in remote sensing, agronomy, GIS, satellite imagery and farm data.</p>
<p>Innovation: programme increases digital skills by providing state-of-the-art equipment and hands-on training to both aspiring agricultural professionals and seasoned farmers.</p>		<p>Provides opportunity to give access to digital tools such as Sentinel Hub, NDVI analysis platforms, and farm mapping software</p>
<p>Reputation: Risk of not securing funding</p>	<p>WCC and Sparsholt College team have proven track record of securing external funding</p>	<p>Strong partnership with Sparsholt College provides opportunity for to bid for alternative funding for rural communities</p>



Achievement of outcome: Poor engagement amongst students and rural community	Comprehensive marketing plan  Part of student curriculum	
Property		
Community Support	Comprehensive stakeholder engagement plan	
Timescales: Lead in time to purchase equipment		Opportunity to procure at risk before funding
Project capacity	Dedicated officers at Winchester City Council and Sparsholt College responsible for delivering outcomes	Opportunity for add on projects such as a rural conference

## 11 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

- 11.1 This programme bridges the gap between cutting-edge Agri-Tech and practical farming knowledge, by providing digital skills training and access to technical equipment. Combining academic insight with real-world application, empowers participants to make data-driven decisions on crop health, soil management, irrigation, and yield forecasting.
- 11.2 It serves as a strategic initiative to equip agricultural students with the technical competencies demanded by the modern Agri-Tech industry, while simultaneously providing local farmers with the opportunity to upskill in precision farming practices. Through shared learning and real-world application, it contributes to the development of a resilient, future-ready workforce, capable of navigating the evolving challenges of the agricultural sector.
- 11.3 Beyond its educational impact, the programme is designed to cultivate new partnerships between Sparsholt College, local farms, and industry stakeholders, laying the foundation for a more connected and innovative agricultural ecosystem. Fostering collaboration between academia and the farming community, the programme enhances productivity, supports sustainable land management, and drives economic growth across the Winchester district.
- 11.4 The programme will provide access to the latest technical equipment and training to 20 farmers and 40 students who would be otherwise excluded developing digital skills, either through lack of skills or access to equipment.

### 11.5 Programme Delivery

Delivered at Sparsholt College, the three-month training programme includes:

- a) Workshops and seminars led by experts in remote sensing, agronomy, and GIS
- b) Practical sessions using satellite imagery and farm data from the Winchester District
- c) Collaborative projects pairing students with farmers to solve real agricultural challenges
- d) Access to digital tools such as Sentinel Hub, NDVI analysis platforms, and farm mapping software
- e) Follow-up support through online resources and one-on-one advisory sessions
- f) Participants will learn to interpret high-resolution Earth observation imagery to monitor crop health, assess soil conditions, and manage land use with precision. The use of Copernicus Open Access Data and cloud-based platforms like EO Browser ensures cost-free access to vast datasets, removing financial barriers for small farms.

### 11.6 Programme Milestones

November 2025	Purchase of equipment Training of staff
November – December 2025	Three Introductory workshops to farm Winchester to River Test, Candover and South Downs farm clusters.  Three theoretical workshops delivered to students and farmers at Sparsholt College. [OBJ]
Between November and December	Create training programme curriculum
January 2026	Begin three-month technical teaching programme
February 2026	Rural conference title to be agreed - to include project achievements. Held at Sparsholt College
March 2026	Equipment loans to farmers and students

## 11.7 Summary of Programme Key Performance Indicators

Area of Performance	Key Performance Indicator
<b>Programme Engagement and Reach</b>	20 Farmers and 40 students  80% attendance
<b>Measure of consistency and commitment to the programme.</b>	All 20 allocated farmer-student collaboration projects completed to satisfaction  90% of participants will be able to independently use satellite tools (e.g., EO Browser, NDVI platforms)
<b>Agricultural Impact</b>	All students and farmers to demonstrate plans to reduce input usage of fertiliser, water, pesticides to show efficiency gains through precision agriculture.  Five farms adopting satellite-based monitoring post-programme within six months to indicate long-term behavioural change.
<b>Environmental &amp; Sustainability Metrics</b>	Area of land under improved management practices Number of biodiversity hotspots or erosion risks identified and addressed
<b>Educational &amp; Career Development</b>	Number of student placements or internships resulting from the programme  25% increase in number of students pursuing Agri-Tech or geospatial careers from pilot.
<b>Community &amp; Ecosystem Strengthening</b>	Number of advisory sessions delivered post-training  New partnerships formed between Sparsholt College and local farms Repeat participation or referrals from past attendees

12 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 12.1 Do not submit a grant application to the Digital Innovation Inclusion Fund. This is not recommended as the council would miss out on the opportunity to secure £223,850 to support digital skills training for its farming communities.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: -

Previous Committee Reports: -

None

Other Background Documents: -

[Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund - GOV.UK](#)

APPENDICES:

CAB3524 APPENDIX Digital Inclusion Innovation Equality Impact Assessment