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Report on the operation
and performance of the
E-Channel Launchpads
with SMEs

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1. Introduction

In the original bid (p28), we said:

- *The outcomes will be reviews of the E-Channel Launchpads operation and performance in the support of export / new markets:*
- *Vertical Plus and Soledis will review quarterly the operation and use of Launchpads by SMEs including via their feedback [5]. Months 9, 12, 15, 18 & 21.*
- *This will add to the work done by Vertical Plus and Soledis to address technical and cultural exchange, undertaken at the start of the project.*

The five quarterly reviews of the E-Channel Launchpads operation and performance were part of a collaborative technical exchange and part of a process of supporting individual SMEs to access new markets. Lessons learned informed Launchpad operations and overall adjustments to the SMEs' New Market Entry Plans and their use of E-Channel Platform tools.

2. Methodology

This report focuses on the performance of the E-Channel Launchpads. Information is taken from five quarterly reviews which took place in Months 9, 12, 15, 18, and 21. These reviews have been summarised in one report.

Each review period lasted for a month. During these review periods, information was gathered from a variety of sources to track and log issues. These sources included formal meetings such as Project Management Meetings (PMM), technical meetings, meetings between Launchpad staff, discussions from micro-meetings and informal catch-up meetings, informal conversations and comments, and email communications from different stakeholders at various points during that month. There were recurring themes during the cycle of reviews. Progress and analysis of these themes was updated during each review period.

Table 1 below is an overview of the five quarterly reviews of the E-Channel Launchpads.

Month	Review	Notes
Month 9	May 2020	Launchpad Quarterly Review 1 - May 2020
Month 12	August 2020	Launchpad Quarterly Review 2 - August 2020
Month 15	November 2020	Launchpad Quarterly Review 3 - November 2020
Month 18	February 2021	Launchpad Quarterly Review 4 - February 2021
Month 21	May 2021	Launchpad Quarterly Review 5 - May 2021

Table 1: Overview of the five quarterly reviews of the E-Channel Launchpads

This report should be read in tandem with the report on the operation and performance of the E-Channel DMCP with SMEs¹, as this report is also a summary of five reviews from the same periods. The Launchpad teams interacted with the technical teams to share the technology to be used with the SMEs.

As part of the process of engagement with the participant SMEs, it is important to note that:

- Each participant SME had access to their own Launchpad Account Manager at their Launchpad.
- Every Launchpad Account Manager had experience of supporting clients, including SMEs, across a range of e-commerce supported activities.
- Information was logged by the Launchpad Account Managers as part of the planned ongoing cycle of monthly reviews with the SMEs of their New Market Entry Plans.
- Any additional, interim meetings or conversations, via email, telephone, or remote teleconferencing, which both the SME or the Launchpad Account Manager could request, were also logged.
- The Launchpad Account Manager also had access to the SMEs' online site data from their websites, before it was connected to the DMCP, as well as DMCP data.
- An update on the SMEs undertaking e-commerce supported new market entry with the support of the E-Channel Launchpads was a standing agenda item at the formal Project Management Meetings.
- Headlines and significant trends from this process were discussed monthly at the formal Project Management Meetings, attended by the CEOs of both Vertical Plus and Soledis, the Project Manager, the Project Coordinator, with a non-executive director from the Lead Partner as chair.
- The Launchpad Account Managers also attended these meetings or provided briefings.

Additional reports that feature the work of the E-Channel Launchpads are available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/> and include the following:

- SME Onboarding and Consultation Process and Journey flowchart
- Report on key lessons learned in establishing E-Channel Consultancy Services
- Team briefing document on the shared technology to be used for E-Channel
- Report on E-Channel Coaching and Partnership Mode
- Report on SME onboarding and induction
- Briefing document outlining E-Channel technological model for participants
- Report on key lessons from participant SMEs / project team experience
- Report on key findings and lessons learned from the Launchpad SME preparation and audit

¹ A report on the operation / performance of the E-Channel DMCP with SMEs is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

3. Chronology, Context and Covid-19

It is helpful to consider the work undertaken and reviewed from May 2020 onwards against the backdrop of Covid-19.

Table 2 below sets the E-Channel project in the context of Brexit and against the backdrop of Covid-19; both of which impacted upon the development and operation of the Launchpads.

Month	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	Aug 2020	Sept 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	March 2021	April 2021	May 2021
Review	Review 1	Project Modification agreed		Review 2			Review 3			Review 4			Review 5
SMEs	SME selection, recruitment and onboarding phase												
Brexit		The UK rules out transition period extension	Legal deadline for signing off an extension				Dec 2020 UK and EU agree to Free Trade Agreement UK Parliament Approves EU Trade Deal Brexit Transition Period Ends		Jan 2021 Border Control Introduced				
Covid-19 UK	UK Tier system including full lockdown in some areas						Tiers	Tiers	UK Lockdown				Phased re-opening
Covid-19 FR	FR Lockdown					Oct FR Lockdown 2 until Mid Dec 2020						3 April FR Lockdown	Phased re-opening

Table 2: Launchpad operation in the context of Brexit and Covid-19

- France was put into lockdown on March 17th. The UK was put into lockdown on 23rd March 2020.
- As far as possible, E-Channel continued to work towards the outcomes and deliverables in the project plan. This was also a condition of funding. Throughout this critical period, communication with the Joint Secretariat was timely and supportive.
- By May 2020, the first Quarterly Review, the E-Channel Project had been feeling the impact of the pandemic and had been attempting to mitigate against it, for three months.
- From March 2020, face-to-face meetings did not take place in the UK, due to Covid19 restrictions.
- In France, due to different Covid-19 restrictions, 50% of the French participant SMEs were able to meet with their Launchpad Account Manager, face-to-face, at least once, at the SME's own premises.
- Launchpad morale on both sides of the Channel went up once the SME recruitment process started, and up again once onboarding of the SMEs began but morale at the

Launchpads was negatively impacted by not being able to have as many face-to-face meetings with the SMEs as they would have wanted.

- No UK Launchpad face-to-face meetings with the UK SMEs took place. The French Launchpad was able to hold 9 face-to-face meetings with their SMEs at the SMEs premises which, although a low number, was still more than the UK Launchpad was able to achieve, and this also impacted morale at the UK Launchpad.

Despite the changes made due to Covid-19, the project successfully recruited the target number of 24 SMEs, as illustrated in Table 3 below.

SME Sign-Up Progress			
Review Meeting	UK SMEs signed up	FR SMEs signed up	Total
Review Meeting 1 May 2020	0	0	0
Review Meeting 2 August 2020	6	4	10
Review Meeting 3 November 2020	9	8	17
Review Meeting 4 February 2021	12	12	24

Table 3: SME sign-up running total

4. The Quarterly Meetings

This section captures the headlines and main points from the five review meetings, under four headings so that context, progress, and ways forward can be identified:

1. Challenges
2. Review of the UK Launchpad and FR Launchpad operation and performance
3. Overview, including Technical Exchange and Cultural Exchange
4. Lessons learned

4.1 Challenges

4.1.1 Challenges - Review 1 May 2020 - Delays due to Covid-19

- The French and UK Launchpads had been working remotely for three months, since March 2020.
- After initial concerns in March and April 2020, the Covid-19 situation was becoming a 'new normal'.
- As SMEs themselves, both project partners had to take care of their own businesses as well as E-Channel, so in some ways, the Launchpads were navigating the same uncertain waters as any potential SMEs they hoped to recruit during the next period.
- Both project partners were still optimistic that the project could offer SMEs e-commerce support to access new markets, particularly in the face of the pandemic, but agreed they would be relieved when the SME recruitment phase of the project started.
- No face-to-face visits with (potential) participant SMEs took place between March 2020 and May 2020 by either the UK or French Launchpads, which was frustrating but the developing Covid-19 situation made this period one of anxiety and uncertainty.
- Due to Covid-19, the Launchpads were delayed with SME preparation and sign-up as had been planned.
- The Launchpads were not operating in the way which had been planned. Due to the lockdowns, they could no longer function as physical offices or drop-in centres for participant SMEs or Business Support Organisations (BSO) to visit. Instead, the Launchpads had to create new processes, beyond the original project plan.
- To mitigate against Covid-19, a project modification was submitted to the JS in April 2020 but had not been approved by May 2020. The modification was complex because of its impact across the project, including changes to the budget and viring of funds.

4.1.2 Challenges - Review 2 August 2020

SMEs signed up - UK 6 / FR 4 = 10/24

- The Project Modification was accepted and agreed with the JS in June 2020.
- Lockdowns in the UK and France operated under different rules as well as different dates and time periods.
- An Account Manager from the French Launchpad made one face-to-face visit to a French SME at their own premises.
- The UK Launchpad made no face-to-face visits.
- No SMEs visited the UK or French Launchpads.
- New processes and operations that were put in place by the Launchpads to mitigate Covid-19 had been bedded down.
- The physical nature of the Launchpads was replaced by remote working and video conferencing tools, including the initial SME sign-up and induction, utilising the project's distance learning platform.
- A lack of engagement by Business Support Organisations (BSO) during this period was very disappointing. Both project partners felt as if they were on their own, despite having reached out to major BSOs in both the UK and France. However, the BSOs were also impacted by Covid-19 and Brexit so this was a turbulent time for everyone.
- Despite Covid-19, the SME sign-up process was underway which was a great relief. 10 of the 24 SMEs were recruited.
- As those participant SMEs with physical shops had reduced footfall or had to close their premises, support for new market entry concentrated on online-only opportunities.

4.1.3 Challenges - Review 3 November 2020

SMEs signed up - UK 9 / FR 8 = 17/24

- The Launchpads were functioning well as virtual hubs.
- Lockdowns in the UK and France continued to operate under different rules, dates, and time periods which made coordination and the sharing of best practice between the Launchpads more difficult.
- Account Managers from the French Launchpad made three visits to French SMEs at their own premises.
- The UK Launchpad made no face-to-face visits.
- No SMEs visited the UK or French Launchpads.
- Preparation for Brexit was a significant challenge for planning and operation for both project partners and participant SMEs.

4.1.4 Challenges - Review 4 February 2021

SMEs signed up - UK 12 / FR 12 = 24/24

- Brexit happened but the dust had not settled.
- Account Managers from the French Launchpad made two visits to French SMEs at their own premises.
- The UK Launchpad made no face-to-face visits.
- No SMEs visited the UK or French Launchpads.
- The target number of 24 SMEs was recruited.

4.2. Review of the UK Launchpad and FR Launchpad operation and performance

4.2.1 UK and FR Launchpads operation and performance

Review 1 - May 2020

- By May 2020, the Launchpads had been virtual hubs for three months and much of the work undertaken had been preparation for SME engagement.
- Physical visits by the project partners, Launchpads, or technical staff to see each other was not possible from March 2020.
- A project modification, submitted in April 2020, had not been approved by May 2020.
- The project partners agreed they would not wait for the project modification to be agreed with the JS before approaching potential participant SMEs. They were concerned that if they had to wait for up to three months for approval, the Launchpads would not have time to recruit the participant SMEs. They agreed to continue with the next phase of the project; preparation for SME sign-up. This was a challenge for the Launchpads as this work had to be done remotely, not the way envisaged in the bid.
- A Company Specific Criteria Checklist² was used effectively as part of the SME recruitment and selection process.
- As part of Launchpad operations, both Launchpads had tried repeatedly to engage with BSOs since the beginning of 2020, before the pandemic. Unfortunately, Covid-19 (and Brexit) distracted some BSOs from their 'normal' support role. The BSOs were focussed on 'big picture' responses and working with governments and employer bodies, not individual companies.

² The Company Specific Criteria Checklist is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

- In May 2020, the UK Launchpad took part in an event with the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and reached out to Brittany Ferries, who had supported E-Channel since the project bid writing process but had not yet received a response.
- The French Launchpad contacted the Bretagne Chamber of Commerce and Industry but had not yet received a response.
- Other stakeholders, reliant on these BSOs such as SMEs thinking about cross-Channel trade, were frustrated by the lack of BSO engagement at this time.
- However, BSOs on both sides of the Channel could only speculate about Brexit and post-Brexit trading conditions, along with everyone else. Specific BSOs were frustrated because there was little information available at this time. Some BSOs were wary of voicing their frustrations in ways that might be perceived as political, so they chose not to say anything substantive.

4.2.2 UK and FR Launchpads operation and performance Review 2 August 2020

- The Technical Modification was approved on 18/06/2020.
- Launchpad work in this quarter focussed on the recruitment of SMEs.
Key operational changes included:
 1. Greater use of the remote DMCP to achieve SME growth with consultations using remote video conferencing;
 2. More remote webinars and tutorials for participants to replace face-to-face meetings;
 3. Enhanced remote monitoring and assessment tools.
- This work was extended by 4 months to allow further development of the consultancy services. Reporting of completion of activities moved from Period 2 to Period 3, so will be reviewed in Month 18 (February 2021).
- The Launchpads carried out virtual evaluations with the SMEs using the Company Specific Criteria Checklist. This was effective but time-consuming, especially when done remotely.
- The remote SME evaluation process worked best when it was done collaboratively between the potential participant SMEs and their Launchpad Account Managers as the SMEs did not always give the most helpful answers if they did it on their own.
- A significant number of SMEs were unsure of some of the e-commerce and technical questions. "They don't know what they don't know".
- Both Launchpads invested more time to support the SMEs remotely and planned further technical support during their consultancy work with the SMEs.
- Due to the pandemic, SME demand for e-commerce distance selling and new market access increased.
- There had been concerns about being able to onboard 24 SMEs due to Brexit uncertainties, as well as Covid-19 so it was a great relief when the short-listing and selection process started.
- 10 SMEs recruited to date - 14 to go.
- A full end-to-end consultancy model was developed and the recruited French and UK SMEs started their e-commerce journey with E-Channel.
- This was not the journey that was originally envisaged as neither the SMEs nor the BSOs and Non-BSOs were able to use the Launchpads as a physical hub.
- SME induction would have brought the Launchpad teams and the SMEs together, using the Launchpads as training hubs with SME peer learning as part of the experience. This could not happen.
- It was envisaged that the SMEs would be recruited and on-boarded in tranches of 8 so they would have their induction and initial e-commerce training together at the Launchpads, with opportunities for the SMEs to visit each other's Launchpads, as cultural exchange was an important part of the project.

- The tranche system was not used due to the nature of remote working. The Launchpads worked with each SME individually, as they were recruited. The progress of participant SMEs was monitored 'virtually' by the Launchpads.
- Originally, it was planned that BSOs would support the Launchpads with SME identification and shortlisting. By August 2020, the French Launchpad had received a lot of support from the Brittany Chamber of Commerce and Industry, including marketing and publicity; providing more than twenty potential SME leads.
- The UK Launchpad, although actively engaged in contacting BSOs, did not receive any direct E-Channel focussed BSO support. Therefore, the UK Launchpad carried out its own marketing campaigns and was able to find and recruit participant SMEs without the need for input from BSOs. The marketing element, carried out remotely by the UK Launchpad, was key to attracting SMEs, although, in the period between March to May 2020, it was difficult to make contact with potential SME marketing staff, and BSO marketing departments, as many were on furlough, working different work patterns, had gone part-time, had switched to other roles or had even made redundant due to Covid-19.
- The Launchpads were not able to put SMEs in touch directly with BSOs as had been the intention. The BSOs could not physically come to the Launchpad offices to meet with the project partners or the participant SMEs.
- The E-Channel project plan had been modified to include online materials and activities as opposed to physical attendance at events.
- E-Channel engaged in virtual BSO events, for example, with the FBCCI, for the benefit of the project.
- The FBCCI discussed the possibility of the project partners doing a joint event with them.
- The Launchpads could not host events to attract potential participant SMEs or attend trade events - none of this could take place due to Covid-19.
- The Launchpads maintained the E-Channel UK and French websites as an ongoing activity, with Social Media linked to the website including LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.
- The Launchpads moved to explicit use of the term 'consultancy' to define their services to SMEs, to work explicitly with reference to State Aid and WTO rules and found new ways of working with participant SMEs to access the consultancy services in pandemic conditions via greater access to distance selling.

4.2.3 UK and FR Launchpad operation and performance Review 3 November 2020

- The project partners reflected that a great deal of project time had, necessarily, been given over to mitigate against Covid-19 and to agree and write the project modification, but as a result, the Launchpads had some ground to make up in the time left for them to work with the SMEs.
- Both Launchpads reported increased demand for e-commerce support due to Covid-19.
- SME sign-up continued, although some of the potential participant SMEs were affected by the lockdown, or they were gearing up for their Christmas sales push, so paused their engagement with E-Channel.
- The FBCCI Connects Team offered to provide training to the UK Launchpad staff on how to use the Business Connects platform, and this went ahead.
- The UK Launchpad made several attempts to contact e-commerce specialists at the Department for International Trade (DIT) but did not hear back from them.
- The French Launchpad made several attempts to contact the Prefecture de Haute Normandie but did not hear back from them.
- The French Launchpad voiced concerns about post-Brexit project funding as the UK had an agreement with Europe for project financing post-Brexit but France did not.

- A push by the Launchpads to work with Non-BSOs in October paid off, with two marketing agencies (one in the UK and one in France), an advertising agency, and a logistics specialist, doing some specific work e.g., blogs for E-Channel.
- The French Launchpad continued to work with the Brittany Chamber of Commerce and Industry to advertise the project and to recruit participant SMEs. This promotional work was so successful that it also supported the French Launchpad with potential participant candidate SMEs. The relationship between the French Launchpad and the Brittany Chamber of Commerce and Industry was paramount.

4.2.4 UK and FR Launchpad operation and performance

Review 4 February 2021

- The UK Launchpad's work with two Non-BSOs; a PR Agency and Marketing Agency supported the final recruitment of UK SMEs.
- The French Launchpad worked with a Non-BSO on a Twitter campaign and content, including Textbroker, and continued to receive support from the Brittany Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- Both the French and UK Launchpads successfully recruited and onboarded the target number of 24 participant SMEs, and had systems in place to monitor their progress.
- The Launchpads supported each SME with an evaluation and a New Market Entry Plan.
- The Launchpads wanted to work with the BSOs and signpost the BSOs and SMEs towards each other but a lack of BSO engagement, particularly from early 2020 to February 2021 due in part to Brexit uncertainty, meant that this did not happen.
- The FBCCI Shared Event was booked for the 2nd March 2021. The event had a working title of Brexit, Covid-19, and New Markets - the experience of the E-Channel Project consultancy in the UK and France.

4.3 Launchpad Overview - Technical and Cultural Exchange

A full report on joint technical, operations, cultural exchange, and innovation is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

4.3.1 Launchpad Technical and Cultural Exchange - Review 1 May 2020

- Briefing documents and guides for SMEs and BSOs were discussed and designed, taking into consideration that the Launchpads were now remote hubs.
- The project partners had agreed to have an exchange of Launchpad staff, but as they were unable to visit each other's Launchpad, this collaborative work had to take place virtually. This strategy did not support deeper or longer-term cultural understanding or engagement as much as face-to-face working would have done.
- There were discussions that, as part of the technical exchange, and to mitigate Covid-19, the Launchpads might offer additional support by way of E-Channel distance learning and short, online courses. As the Launchpads could no longer be used as training venues, or for face-to-face support, the project partners discussed remote, interactive systems. Moodle, an online distance learning platform, was proposed as a way for the Launchpads to provide technical support to the participant SMEs. It would be used for learning resources so the SMEs could access their toolset, data, and materials in an exciting, active way through a badge or award system. These discussions about remote, interactive systems, including Moodle, provided an informative technical exchange between the French and UK Launchpads.

4.3.2 Launchpad Technical and Cultural Exchange - Review 2 August 2020

- The UK and French Launchpads both reported that the sharing of best practice was hindered as the planned exchange of staff did not go ahead, except via virtual meetings.
- There was an overreliance by the UK Launchpad on the French Launchpad being able to conduct meetings in English.
- Both Launchpads reported that virtual meetings could be time-consuming.
- Both Launchpads monitored the Brexit situation and its potential impact on SMEs seeking market entry. There was great uncertainty around the impact of Brexit on supply chains and Response Handling and Fulfilment (RHF), although this varied from one sector to another.
- Work started on a report on key lessons learnt in working with participant SMEs in a Brexit context³.
- During this time, Covid-19 was the top consideration for both Launchpads. From the French Launchpad perspective, Brexit was not such a high-profile issue in France.

4.3.3 Launchpad Technical and Cultural Exchange - Review 3 November 2020

- Both the UK and French Launchpad Account Managers had difficulty with accessing SME data and working with the SMEs on its interpretation and use. This was more time-consuming when Launchpad-SME communications and interactions were remote.
- As the Launchpads could not offer onsite support and training, collaborative work continued on developing the Big Blue Button and Moodle.
- Both Launchpads worked on a Brexit / New Market Questionnaire⁴, to go out to the participant SMEs from February 2021, as by then post-Brexit trading conditions would be in place.

4.3.4 Launchpad Technical and Cultural Exchange - Review 4 February 2021

- It was initially intended that the Launchpads would act as technical and cultural hubs to bring the participant SMEs together with events and training.
- This would be a vital cultural element as events would have been held to showcase e-commerce new markets in both France and the UK, despite Brexit.
- It was also envisaged that both French and UK participant SMEs might work together, and network with each other with later cross-Channel SME networking possible.
- Although none of this was able to take place due to Covid-19, the project partners agreed that they would like to explore this consultancy model in future projects.

³ A report on key lessons learnt in working with participant SMEs in a Brexit context is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

⁴ Both questionnaires are available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

4.4 Lessons Learned

4.4.1 Lessons learned - Review 1 May 2020

1	The Company Specific Criteria Checklist was a helpful script to use with potential participant SMEs as it included questions that were fundamental to the SMEs' eligibility to join the project, including their status as an SME and their geological location.
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4.4.2 Lessons learned - Review 2 August 2020

2	The French go on holiday during August. The French Launchpad was prepared for this but the UK Launchpad, although being advised of this anecdotally, did not realise that so few French SMEs, French BSOs, or French Launchpad staff would be available.
3	Setting up an SME Progress Spreadsheet ⁵ so that the Launchpads could monitor the engagement and progress of participant SMEs proved highly effective for all Launchpad staff. They could monitor progress and any outstanding issues. It also helped to mitigate against drift and was an effective way to log communication with the participant SMEs.
4	It had been envisaged that there would be groups or tranches of recruitment but SME sign-up took longer due to remote working. It was more practical to evaluate and work with each SME separately as they came forward.
5	It was a very useful exercise for the Launchpads to work together to develop greater remote activities and communications. Although additional work was required to develop electronic briefing guides, it put the Launchpads in the mindset of the recipients, from SMEs with little e-commerce experience to large BSOs, and to consider their needs. The briefing guides helped different stakeholder groups to understand the E-Channel project and facilitated their involvement and contribution.

4.4.3 Lessons learned - Review 3 November 2021

6	The SME Progress Spreadsheets were very effective but it was important to log all contact and to keep them updated. Some SMEs engaged with the Launchpads more regularly than others at the start of their consultation. Logging all contact, including any virtual meetings, emails, and phone calls between the monthly review meetings helped the Launchpads to detect any issues early on.
7	It was important for the Launchpad Account Managers to understand SME motivation, experience, and capacity for growth but also their attitude towards risk as well as opportunities.
8	To try to address the challenges of effective communication while working under lockdown, the lead partner considered and designed a Project Progress Update Form; a form to be used by both the French and UK Launchpad teams, but this process was an unnecessary layer as having more frequent micro-meetings addressed many communications issues.

⁵ An example of an SME progress spreadsheet is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

9	There was so much uncertainty about Brexit that neither the UK SMEs nor French SMEs were very interested in discussing Post-Brexit trading conditions or new market opportunities, so in hindsight, it was a good decision not to ask them about this until Spring 2021.
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4.4.4 Lessons learned - Review 4 February 2021

10	Effective systems and processes from the outset helped the Launchpads to keep the project on track. This included administrative support for the project management meetings, with agendas, minutes and actions, (translated) as well as the key documents and spreadsheets which were used to monitor SME progress.
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5. Month 21 Review 5 - Final Review

5.1 Challenges - Final Review

- By this stage of the project, Brexit had happened, the global Covid-19 situation was still unfolding. The project has met its targets and deliverables to date and was on course to meet all the end-of-project deliverables.
- In March 2020, when the UK and France first felt the impact of Covid-19, there was a blanket communications shutdown from many BSOs. The Joint Secretariat made itself available to E-Channel at the time of greatest uncertainty. The E-Channel Project would like to thank the Joint Secretariat for its timely help and support during these unprecedented times and throughout the project.

5.2 The Launchpads: UK and FR - Reviews of operation and performance- Final Review

Covid-19

- The Launchpads had to create new processes which were beyond the original project plan. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen how far both Launchpads had to mitigate against Covid-19 by changing and innovating their processes and operations before they were embedded and before receiving feedback from the participant SMEs.
- Time was a crucial element. The time taken to consider, plan and agree the project modification led to early delays in Launchpad operations. The delay, and then changes in DMCP development to offer greater remote access, led to a delay in the onboarding of SMEs, and, with hindsight, the support period was possibly too short, particularly given certain needs such as redesigning or restarting websites.

Remote working

- The impact of Covid-19 was felt differently by the UK and French Launchpads and so impacted their operation and performance differently. For example, there were times when different lockdown rules applied in the UK and France:
 - During the French lockdowns, remote working was not mandatory for the French Launchpad, and secure, face-to-face meetings at the premises of the participant SME were able to go ahead.
 - During the UK lockdowns, remote working was mandatory for the UK Launchpad and it was not able to hold any face-to-face meetings.

- The Launchpads were designed to be the people resource; the human face of the project. Although a mix of physical office and remote working was normal practice for both the UK and French Launchpads, as both project partners were experts in the e-commerce sector, this was not necessarily the case for the UK or French participant SMEs, or for the BSOs and Non-BSOs who also engaged in the project. Supporting and enabling the participant SMEs to adapt to remote working had an impact on the operation and performance of the Launchpads. It was time-consuming and the planned 4-month intensive time period for the consultations took longer than envisaged. Due to Covid-19 and Brexit, the focus of the Launchpad engagement with the SMEs was much wider than just e-commerce. These factors resulted in a potentially slower pace of e-commerce development, with delays and distractions prevalent.

Technical support

- The Launchpads did not fully take into account all the different platforms the participant SMEs were using so connecting data across the many different platforms being used by the SMEs was a challenge.
- Launchpad operations were slowed by having to give more technical support to the participant SMEs than had been envisaged.
- In addition, the participant SMEs had different needs and IT skills. It was envisaged that the consultancy would be bespoke for each SME, but to have an impact the consultancy was often wide and varied. Again, the focus of the Launchpad engagement with the SMEs was much wider than just e-commerce.

BSO engagement

- Both the UK and French Launchpad operations were impacted by an early lack of engagement from UK and French BSOs.

5.3 Launchpad Overview - Technical and Cultural Exchange - Final Review

- Despite remote working, a technical and cultural exchange⁶ took place, although not necessarily in the ways which were initially envisaged.
- Many different factors disrupted the smooth operation of the project.
 - A project modification was made to mitigate against Covid-19;
 - Additional time was needed to work on greater remote project access;
 - The recruitment flow of SMEs was disrupted;
 - More time was needed for SME technical support;
 - There was great uncertainty leading up to Brexit, followed by the confusion of post Brexit trading conditions;
 - BSO disengagement during a crucial time in the project (March to June 2020 and beyond).

Many of the Launchpad engagements were of a different type than had been envisaged and the factors above impacted how the project was modified and reorganised. The time spent by the Launchpads adjusting to provide enhanced support for the SMEs on their e-commerce journey, with remote working, occurred in the timeline of the project when the project partners had expected to have exchanges between Launchpads, supporting cultural exchange and integration of the Launchpad teams.

⁶ A separate report on the project partner's collaboration on technical, operational, cultural exchange and innovation is available at <https://www.e-channel.org/resources/>

5.4 Lessons Learned and Final Review - Summary

- COVID-19 had a substantial impact on the project.
- Brexit and post-Brexit trading conditions caused a great deal of uncertainty and impacted the SMEs' decisions regarding where to seek new markets.
- The demand for e-commerce consultancy rose after April 2020.
- Despite Covid-19, the Launchpads were able to recruit the target number of SMEs and take them through the consultancy process on their e-commerce journey.
- Having engaged with the target number of participant SMEs, both Launchpads then extended the offer to SMEs outside the project;
- Both Launchpads engaged with BSOs and Non-BSOs.
- The consultancy model, developed by the project partners and put into operation by the Launchpads, has proven to be robust, flexible, and effective in supporting SMEs thinking about using e-commerce for new market entry.
- Both the UK and French Launchpads plan to extend the E-Channel service package and create a new service, based on this model, with a focus on new market entry and internationalisation.