Forward Plan reference number: FP/436/06/22

Report title: Delivering Digital Essex	
Report to: Councillor Lesley Wagland - Cabinet Member for Economic Renewal, Infrastructure and Planning, and Councillor Christopher Whitbread – Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs	
Report author: Steve Evison – Director for Sustainable Growth	
Date: 20 May 2022	**For:** Decision
Enquiries to: Doug Parrant – Head of Digital Connectivity	
County Divisions affected: Countywide	

1. Everyone's Essex

1.1 In service of Essex County Council's ambitions to deliver a strong, inclusive and stable economy as set out in Everyone's Essex and our Levelling Up agenda, this report seeks agreement to fund a suite of connectivity and digital inclusion initiatives across the County.

1.2 This work is principally focussed on delivering ECC's ambitions for Infrastructure, Levelling-Up Economy and Levelling Up Health. Digital Essex will support and fund improved digital connectivity and is managing digital inclusion as a thematic issue. We will ensure no individual or business is excluded from the digital revolution due to lack of infrastructure, affordable access, equipment, skills or confidence. We will work with key partners across the Essex system taking a cohort and locality focused approach, prioritising the places and people highlighted through the Levelling Up research while also seeking to shape the market.

1.3 Digital Essex will actively manage and facilitate the deployment of digital connectivity **infrastructure** and the adoption of digital technology, as it is now a necessity in order to build a future-ready society. The team has plans to fund infrastructure projects to ensure that via improved connectivity, Essex residents are able to access good jobs and the growing global market for fully remote working.

1.4 The ability to access digitally delivered services has evolved organically. It is now imperative to enable all citizens to use online services, irrespective of their financial, educational or social status.

2. Recommendations

For Councillor Lesley Wagland – Cabinet Member for Economic Renewal

2.1 Agree to the Digital Strategy for Essex in the form set out at appendix 1 to this report.

For Councillor Christopher Whitbread – Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs

2.2 Agree to draw down £1.88m from the Everyone's Essex Reserve to fund the operation of the ECC Digital Essex programme, to improve digital connectivity and digital inclusion, for the three financial years from 2023/24 to 2025/26, as follows for staffing costs and partner collaboration to deliver the Digital Strategy:

- 2023/24: £628,063
- 2024/25: £628,063
- 2025/26: £628,063

3. Background and Proposal

Delivering superfast, a great success

3.1 Since 2013, ECC's Digital Essex broadband programme, with support and funding from district councils, has secured enhanced connectivity for residents and businesses across Essex.

3.2 Recognising the disparity between urban and rural connectivity, ECC secured funding from DEFRA and the Getting Build Fund to connect over 3,500 of the hardest to reach rural homes and businesses in Essex.

3.3 Demand for digital connections has increased year on year since 2013. Currently 75% of residents or businesses enabled by the Digital Essex broadband programme have purchased a connection. Additionally, as gigabit connectivity becomes more available (broadband connections with speeds of 1,000Mbps or more) there is an emerging trend that the take-up of gigabit capable connections increases, with over 40% of people taking up a service.

3.4 This demand for gigabit connections is a result of technology changes and user expectations increasing. Currently 57% of residents and business can access a gigabit capable broadband service in Essex. Essex is exploring how it can support the national roll out programme of gigabit connections, with a national investment of £5 billion, to raise gigabit coverage to 85%.

3.5 5G technology is already available to some residents and businesses and this can offer a wireless gigabit-capable alternative to broadband. However, its rollout is only likely to focus on urban and densely populated areas, with a real likelihood that large numbers of residents and businesses in Essex remain unable to access gigabit connections.

3.6 ECC faces a challenge to ensure faster digital connectivity reaches everyone in Essex.

Meeting the Gigabit challenge, to benefit residents and business

3.7 As part of ECC's COVID-19 recovery initiatives, in August 2020 (Digital Connectivity Strategy for Essex), ECC agreed to develop a Digital Strategy for Essex with a focus on driving faster deployment and further reach of digital connectivity, to support the adoption of digital technology and accelerate economic growth in Essex.

3.8 This strategy was finalised in 2021, following collaboration with a range of partners including NHS bodies, the Essex Online Partnership, ASELA (Association of South Essex Local Authorities), the DIZ (West Essex and East Herts Digital Innovation Zone). All partners expressed their support. It is proposed that ECC agree and adopt the ECC Digital Strategy for Essex ("the Strategy") in the form set out at appendix 1 to this report.

3.9 The Strategy takes into account both residents and businesses with the aim of ensuring improved digital connectivity and the skills, confidence and motivation to

achieve the best in our emerging digital society. Further details of the strategy are set out below

For Business

3.10   For businesses the strategy aims are:

3.10.1 To support businesses to recover from the impact of Covid-19, by offering them access to excellent digital connections to rebuild or rethink their activities and business model.

3.10.2 To support the national roll out programme and develop a local grant scheme to ensure universal gigabit connectivity across the county enabling all employers and employees to have equal opportunities to contribute to the Essex economy.

3.10.3 To work alongside Essex businesses to provide them with opportunities to develop digital skills that help support business and growth and help to reduce barriers to employment for disadvantaged groups.

For Residents

3.11   For residents the strategy aims are:

3.11.1 To help create a great place to live and work and support people in getting the best start in life and to age well. Digital inclusion initiatives will ensure that all members of our society have the access, skills and confidence needed to engage with our emerging digital society.

3.11.2 To provide access to fast internet supported by the development of digital skills which will enable access to social, cultural, employment and other opportunities.

3.11.3 To ensure that no one should be excluded because of where they live in the county or their financial or educational status.

For the Economy

3.12   Essex has an ambition to become a centre of digital innovation in the UK and to grow digital businesses within the county, as well as attract larger regional and global players.

3.13   As well as bringing in businesses and investment, better connectivity will provide Essex residents with access to a growing global market for fully remote workers.

3.14   Assuming an Essex population of 1.5 million, ubiquitous gigabit coverage presents a potential economic benefit of more than £300million per annum.

3.15   The financial benefits are expected to be driven primarily by the adoption of new business models enabled by faster connectivity.

How ECC's Digital Essex Programme will deliver on its ambition

3.16   ECC's Digital Essex Programme, comprising digital connectivity, adoption and inclusion initiatives, is a strong base from which to deliver the new strategy.

3.17 Digital Essex resources will be shared between the connectivity and inclusion work to enable the most efficient and effective way for us to engage with the relevant partner organisations. This will support co-production and delivery of targeted initiatives and campaigns aimed at the most digitally excluded cohorts and localities.

3.18 The following table outlines the key activities that will be delivered to complete the current programme of superfast rollout and then transition to gigabit connectivity and digital inclusion initiatives.

Strand	Activity
Superfast Rollout	Continue the deployment and delivery phase closure of the Digital Essex rollout programme, ensuring suppliers meet their contractual obligations, that the full intended scope is delivered, and that future subsidy clawback is maximised.
Stakeholder Engagement	Proactively support and advise Members, MPs and other senior public sector stakeholders in their engagement with communities, responding to resident concerns and queries.
Gigabit rollout fixed and mobile, subsidised and commercial	Market engagement with fibre network operators; develop and implement a demand-led voucher or grant scheme, BDUK engagement on Project Gigabit; use of public sector assets for 5G; 5G operator engagement; planning authorities support to enable fixed and 5G rollouts.
Community and Business Engagement	Ongoing engagement with residents and businesses; maximise subsidy clawback by driving adoption of digital services via fixed connections; maintain and develop digital champions network.
Digital Inclusion	Integrate the activities and resources of the ECC Digital Inclusion project into the programme's core work; fully adopt and further develop the Digital Inclusion initiative's strategic aims and delivery plan as shaped during 2022/23.
Partner Collaboration	Lead ECC's engagement with external partners in Essex to inspire, promote and connect digital initiatives across the Essex public sector.
Adoption initiatives and campaigns	Develop and implement targeted campaigns focused on improving adoption of digital technology by Essex businesses, on digital inclusion, digital skills; collaborate with ECC functions and external partners undertaking digital initiatives, acting for instance as subject matter expert and data source.

3.19 Recognising the importance of digital connectivity and digital inclusion to the Everyone's Essex and Levelling Up agenda, funds were allocated to draft the Digital Strategy for Essex. The Digital Essex team is already well established and after completing the Digital Strategy for Essex paper, turned its attention to delivering against the outcomes of the strategy with a number of early projects using savings from the strategy development.

3.20 It is proposed to drawdown £1.88m from reserves from 2023 – 2026. This drawdown funding will be used to fund 10 full time staff at a cost of £548,063 and £80,000 to support and develop collaboration with partners such as local planning authority's and BDUK and targeted campaigns

4.   Links to our Strategic Ambitions

4.1   This report links to the following aims in the Essex Vision:

- Develop our county sustainably
- Connect us to each other and the world
- Share prosperity with everyone

4.2   This report links to the following strategic priorities in 'Everyone's Essex':

- A strong, inclusive and sustainable economy
- A high quality environment
- A good place for children and families to grow

5. Options

5.1   **Option 1 (RECOMMENDED) – Publish the new Digital Strategy, resource the digital connectivity programme to implement the strategy and authorise the reinvestment of broadband infrastructure funds from savings and gainshare.**

5.1.1   This would allow completion of the current programme, which has been successful in delivering superfast broadband to residents and business across the county.

5.1.2   Continue to meet the rising demand for gigabit by working with BDUK on Project Gigabit, making ECC assets available for the deployment of telecommunications equipment.

5.1.3   Create a top-up voucher scheme to utilise infrastructure funds from savings and gainshare to ensure no resident or business is left without a digital connection. This will ensure that no BDUK funding is lost to ECC.

5.1.4   Digital Essex will remove the barriers to digital inclusion including access, skills and confidence to ensure no resident or business is left without the means or ability to access a digital connection.

5.2   **Option 2 (NOT RECOMMENDED) Publish the new Digital Strategy and resource the digital connectivity programme to implement the strategy.**

5.2.1   This would allow completion of the current programme of work and a limited ability to meet the rising demand for gigabit through working with BDUK on Project Gigabit.

5.2.2   Digital Essex will remove the barriers to digital inclusion including access, skills and confidence to ensure no resident or business is left without the means or ability to access a digital connection.

5.2.3   This is not the recommended option, as without funds from savings and gainshare many residents and business will be left with a basic digital connection and will be excluded from the digital future of the county, including an inability to access digital council resources. BDUK funding would be lost in this case.

5.3 **Option 3 (NOT RECOMMENDED) – Decide not to publish and implement the new Digital Strategy, winding up the digital connectivity programme at the end of 2022/23.**

5.3.1 This would only allow completion of the current programme.

5.3.2 This is not the recommended option, as without resourcing of the digital connectivity programme and implementation of the strategy, Essex will be limited in its ability to drive economic growth and realise the levelling up ambition as set out by ECC.

5.3.3 While this option, effectively to do nothing, is not a withdrawal of service that would have a direct negative impact on stakeholders in the county, it is evident from the information presented in 3.2.14 to 3.2.25 that without this programme residents and business could be left behind economically and socially.

6. Issues for consideration

6.2 Financial implications

6.1.1 The Digital Essex programme is currently funded until the end of the 2022/23 financial year. Separately, ECC's Digital Inclusion initiative has existing funding for the 2022/23 financial year. In order to converge the two programmes from 2023/24 onwards, the total funding requirement will be £1.88m for the three-year period to 2025/26.

6.1.2 The table below shows the funding required to be drawn down in each financial year:

Digital Connectivity Programme	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	Total
	£	£	£	£
Staffing Costs	548,063	548,063	548,063	1,644,189
Non-Staffing Costs	80,000	80,000	80,000	240,000
Total Funding Requirement	628,063	628,063	628,063	1,884,189

6.1.3 Staffing costs include National Insurance and Pension costs, they do not include any assumption on future salary increases.

6.1 Legal implications

6.2.1 The Council is not required to have a strategy of this nature. The report explains how the strategy will benefit the Council's strategic priorities.

6.2.2 Adoption of the strategy does not commit the Council to any future commissioning or spending decisions

7. Equality and Diversity Considerations

7.2 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
   (a)   Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful

(b)   Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

(c)   Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

7.2   The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

7.1   The Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

8. List of Appendices

8.1   Equality Comprehensive Impact Assessment

9. List of Background papers

9.1   Digital Essex Strategy Document

	Date
I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report. **Councillor Lesley Wagland, Cabinet Member for Economic Renewal, Infrastructure and Planning**	**Date** 18.08.22
I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report. **Councillor Christopher Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs**	**Date** 05.09.22

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Executive Director, Corporate Services (S151 Officer) **Stephanie Mitchener on behalf of Nicole Wood**	12.08.2022
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer) **Laura Edwards on behalf of Paul Turner**	09.08.22