

Forward Plan reference number: FP/194/10/21

Report title: Digital Connectivity Resourcing	
Report to: Cllr Chris Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs	
Report author: Connie Kerbst, Head of Digital Connectivity; Steve Evison Director for Sustainable Growth	
Date: 12 th January 2022	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 Everyone's Essex sets out four strategic aims and 20 commitments for Essex County Council (ECC) to deliver over the next 4 years. As part of the Strong, Inclusive and Sustainable Economy strategic aim, a key commitment is to deliver and maintain high quality infrastructure to improve opportunities for people living in Essex.
- 1.2 In line with this commitment, ECC's broadband delivery team, Superfast Essex, has prepared a new Digital Connectivity Strategy for Essex, which sets out ECC's ambition to lead, drive and inspire work across the county to create first class digital infrastructure and to achieve the widespread adoption of digital technologies by Essex residents and businesses.
- 1.3 In order to deliver the objectives of this strategy, it is proposed that the resourcing and remit of the Superfast Essex programme, be reshaped and expanded to form a Digital Connectivity Programme, which will drive the implementation of the Strategy.
- 1.4 This work will support the delivery of Everyone's Essex and the commitments set out under ECC's agenda for levelling up the county. It will make an important contribution towards ECC's targeted outcomes for the economy, the environment, children and families and the health and wellbeing of Essex residents.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 To authorise the drawdown of £208,000 from the Transformation Reserve, to support the funding of ECC's reshaped and expanded Digital Connectivity programme, as set out in this report.
- 2.2 To note and agree that the remaining balances from previously agreed Transformation Reserve funding (£213,000 from FP/881/07/17) and Technology Solutions Reserve funding (£164,000 from CMA agreed on 20th June 2020) will be used to resource work to implement the Digital Connectivity strategy in the 2022/23 Financial Year.

3 Background and Proposal

- 3.1 ECC's Superfast Essex programme team has been in existence for nine years and has established a strong track record of successful project delivery, supported by comprehensive expertise and experience in public and partner engagement and

successful campaigns on digital initiatives. The team has also built a positive reputation and a network of public and private sector contacts. Within ECC, within Essex, and also within Department for Digital, Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Local Government Association (LGA), the team is now seen as an effective and trusted collaboration partner.

- 3.2 Until recently, the Superfast Essex team has been primarily focused on delivering fixed broadband infrastructure and on securing and investing external funding to support this infrastructure deployment. In addition, the team is working on communications and engagement seeking to boost the take-up of the new faster broadband services by Essex residents and businesses. Some of the team's achievements so far are:

Infrastructure delivery and funding

- Completion of broadband upgrades to over 146,000 premises across Essex, enabling one in every six Essex premises to access faster speeds during the recent Covid 19 pandemic lockdowns.
- Implemented an innovative commercial funding arrangement to successfully speed up infrastructure delivery under the Superfast Essex programme in Tendring district using advance-funded subsidy clawback.
- Secured £2.2 million in funding contributions from Essex districts plus £7.5m in grant funding from DEFRA, MHCLG, in addition to the superfast rollout match funding provided by DCMS of over £13 million
- Lead collaborator in a Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) project, working with several NHS partners and the private sector to bring gigabit internet connections to 74 GP surgeries in West Essex and East Herts, which support around 300,000 patients in Essex alone.

Communications and engagement

- Winner of the Superfast Award at the national industry conference Connected Britain in 2019.
- Successful implementation of a number of public engagement campaigns focusing on smart technology for social care in the home, the benefits of gigabit-capable broadband and other topics.
- Creation of a toolkit for broadband champions and a case study library showcasing the transformational impact of better connectivity on people's lives.

- 3.3 During the last year, ECC has developed a draft Digital Connectivity Strategy, which articulates a strategic approach towards the management of digital connectivity for Essex, including other aspects such as mobile communications and 5G and the adoption of digital technology by Essex residents and businesses. The Strategy defines the following principles for driving digital connectivity and adoption for Essex:

1. Digital technology is part of everything we do
2. Demand driven infrastructure deployment
3. Digital inclusion and adoption
4. Collaboration with the private sector to support business adoption
5. Active engagement with government
6. The Essex public sector speaks with one voice
7. Barrier busting for telecommunications network operators

- 3.4 To deliver the Strategy, the skills and experience of ECC's Superfast Essex programme offers a strong basis to work from. It is proposed in this report that the programme be expanded to adopt a broader focus in addition to infrastructure deployment and business and resident engagement. Future activities should include active and sustained support for commercially funded deployments of fixed as well as mobile telecommunications infrastructure, including 5G, as well as work to join up and where appropriate lead a range of digital technology adoption initiatives driven by ECC and the Essex public sector.
- 3.5 It is therefore recommended in this report that the existing Superfast Essex programme be expanded to form a Digital Connectivity programme, resourced to deliver the Digital Connectivity Strategy's ambitions and associated action plan, as described in section 5.4 below.
- 3.6 To implement the proposal, the programme will require enhanced funding beyond March 2022, when the current funding period is due to end. The total new staffing cost required for the 22/23 FY is £505,000 (higher due to maternity cover), followed by £490,000 p.a. for subsequent years, plus an enhanced operational budget of £80,000 p.a. for each financial year.
- 3.7 It is noted that the indicative future funding requirement for 2023/24 onwards for the reshaped Digital Connectivity programme will be £570,000 per annum. A further decision to confirm this funding will be sought within the next six months, once discussions to align the work described in this report with ECC's Digital Inclusion initiative have been completed.

4 Links to our Strategic Ambitions

- 4.1 Digital connectivity and adoption will make an important contribution to all aspects of life in Essex. Therefore this report links to all aims within the Essex Vision:
- Enjoy life into old age
 - Provide an equal foundation for every child
 - Strengthen communities through participation
 - Develop our County sustainably
 - Connect us to each other and the world
 - Share prosperity with everyone
- 4.2 Approving the recommendations in this report will lead to the faster deployment of digital infrastructure across Essex. Near ubiquitous and inclusive digital access will enable the faster and wider adoption of digital technology. This will make a comprehensive impact on the Council's ambition to be net carbon neutral by 2030, for instance by offering a viable and widespread alternative to travel, or by enabling the Internet of Things (IoT) with its many applications to reduce carbon emissions, such as energy management for homes and businesses.
- 4.3 Digital connectivity provides the foundation for most of ECC's strategic objectives relating to social mobility and equality of opportunity, which are rooted in accessibility. Digital technology supported by good connectivity will also underpin our strategic drive towards achieving our ambitions targets for a Green economy.
- 4.4 This report links to all strategic priorities in the emerging Organisational Strategy 'Everyone's Essex':

- A strong, inclusive and sustainable economy
- A high-quality environment
- Health wellbeing and independence for all ages
- A good place for children and families to grow

5 Options

5.1 As ECC's strategic ambitions now include a strong focus on digital services, options for the future funding and remit of the Superfast Essex programme have been reviewed, to identify the most effective way of delivering the Digital Connectivity Strategy's objectives. The following options have been identified:

5.2 Option 1 - focus on completing Superfast delivery only - (not recommended)

Funding:

- No additional funding drawn down. £164,000 Strategy CMA funds saved.
- Remaining funds for the Superfast programme used to support a skeleton team from March 22 until June 2023

Description:

- Significantly reduced capacity to focus only on supporting the remaining Superfast Essex programme delivery and subsequent delivery phase closure activity with BDUK only – providing for project assurance work until June 23
- abandon comms and engagement work, other than reactive query responses
- abandon engagement with commercial operators
- abandon demand stimulation/digital adoption work
- abandon BDUK engagement to drive and support Project Gigabit for Essex

Benefits:

- No further funding needed
- Remaining Strategy CMA funds saved
- Superfast Essex delivery programme can be supported to completion

Impact/Risks:

- Unable to deliver most of the proposed Digital Connectivity Strategy objectives
- Loss of an experienced and established team with track record
- Reputational damage from ending wider digital activity
- Redundancy costs (for current Programme Manager)

5.3 Option 2 – retain current activity for one year, then review - (not recommended)

Funding:

- Use remaining reserve allocations for the Superfast programme and under the previous Strategy development CMA,
- Add a smaller Transformation Reserve drawdown of £21,000.
- A total of £398,000 – to be used to maintain the current Superfast Essex team resource only

Description:

- Support completion of a longer Superfast Essex programme delivery timeframe as now required due to recent contract updates

- Maintain minimum engagement with commercial telecoms networks
- Reactive communications with stakeholders and general public; limited demand-stimulation activity and public sector partner engagement

Benefits:

- Superfast Essex delivery programme can be supported to completion
- Work on some Digital Connectivity Strategy objectives can continue

Impact/Risks:

- Continuing uncertainty on team's future creates a high risk to staff retention
- Very limited progress towards Strategy objectives, with targets at risk
- No ability to lead new digital connectivity or adoption initiatives, or take part in wider Essex partner collaboration projects

5.4 Option 3 – enhanced Digital Connectivity Programme (recommended)

Funding:

- Total funding for the reshaped Digital Connectivity programme of £585,000 to be approved for FY 22/23, including a new drawdown from Transformation Reserve of £208,000.
- There is an expectation that new funding of approximately £570,000 p.a. to support the Digital Connectivity programme for a further three years will be made available under a separate governance decision to be sought within the next six months.

Description:

This option will enable ECC to implement in full our proposed activities on digital connectivity and adoption of digital technology by our residents and businesses. This work is a key foundation for driving virtually all ECC's strategic ambitions. It will impact all parts of Essex and will specifically support those of our residents and businesses that most need our help.

- Support completion of a longer Superfast Essex programme delivery timeframe as now required due to recent contract updates, holding suppliers to account closely to avoid further deployment delays.
- Proactive engagement with DCMS to secure earlier deployment in Essex under the national Project Gigabit (currently due to commence procurement in late 2023), and subsequent implementation support.
- Maintain active community engagement on digital connectivity, broadband champions network, respond to enquiries, proactive service take-up campaigns
- Playing an active part in initiatives promoting the wider adoption of digital technology. The programme will join up, encourage, support or lead work focused on promoting digital skills, digital inclusion and business adoption of digital technology, working closely with key ECC digital initiatives or with public sector partners.
- Lead the collection and management of internet connectivity data for Essex, able to monitor achievement of targets and to support a variety of digital projects with specific coverage information.
- Additional work to design and implement specific broadband schemes in collaboration with local communities, commercial operators and DCMS (using

the Gigabit Voucher Scheme), to reach the remaining superfast not-spots as soon as possible.

- Implement sustained engagement with fixed and mobile commercial telecoms networks to secure more rapid deployment and closer alignment with Essex needs. Step up engagement with Highways, Planning and Property functions in ECC and districts to provide a single point of contact for telecoms networks and actively remove barriers to a faster commercially funded telecoms rollout, specifically for 5G.

Benefits:

- Superfast Essex delivery programme can be supported to completion
- Team is resourced to deliver the Digital Connectivity Strategy objectives in full
- Expert team is retained and strengthened, building on existing expertise to create a re-shaped delivery resource for the broader Essex digital agenda
- Reputational gain, establishing ECC as a strong leader of digital initiatives in Essex, with positive impact on future central government funding decisions and inward investment
- Additional resource added to maximise the speed and extent of the commercial infrastructure deployment in Essex, to enable faster rollout to priority areas that require subsidy and to drive the faster adoption of digital technology

Impact/Risks:

- requires additional revenue funding in a broader ECC context that seeks revenue savings
- Additional 2 FTE would need to be recruited on 12-month contracts initially pending decisions on funding for 23/24 onwards, this may impact on ability to recruit the required skills.

6 Issues for consideration

6.1 Financial implications

- 6.1.1. The total funding requirement in 2022/23 for the reshaped Digital Connectivity Programme will be £585,000. If Option 3 as proposed in this report is adopted, then this will be funded as follows:

remaining Superfast funding under FP/881/07/17	£213,000
remaining Strategy development funding (20th Jun 2020 CMA)	£164,000
new allocation from Transformation Reserve	£208,000
TOTAL	£585,000

- 6.1.2. It is recognised that for the FY 23/24 onwards an indicative £570,000 annual revenue allocation will be required to continue to support the Digital Connectivity Programme. A further governance decision to confirm this funding will be sought in Spring 2022.

6.2 Legal implications

- 6.3.1. The Council's financial regulations state that all drawdowns from reserves must be approved by the Cabinet Member for Finance.

- 6.3.2. Drawing down of money from reserves does not authorise any expenditure that is a key decision or any significant changes to ECC services or funding which must be authorised by the relevant Cabinet Member.

7 Equality and Diversity Considerations

- 7.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
- 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
 - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - 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, gender, 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).
- 7.3 The equality 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

- Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA222290799)

9 List of Background documents

- Digital Connectivity Strategy – draft

I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.	Date
Cllr Chris Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs	13/01/2022

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Cllr Lesley Wagland, Cabinet Member for Economic Renewal, Infrastructure and Planning	16/12/2021
Nicole Wood, Executive Director, Finance and Technology (S151 Officer)	11/01/2022
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer) Susan Moussa on behalf of Paul Turner	13/12/2021