

Forward Plan Reference number: Not applicable

Report title: Digital Connectivity Strategy for Essex	
Report to: Cllr Chris Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance	
Report author: Daniel Tooke, Head of Finance	
Date: 20 th June 2020	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 As part of Essex County Council's (ECC) COVID-19 recovery initiatives, it is proposed to develop a Digital Connectivity 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. It is proposed that a cross-functional ECC team is created to develop the strategy. This report seeks approval to draw down funding to deliver this requirement.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To draw down of £200,000 from the Technology Solutions reserve to fund resources to support the team's strategy work.

3. Summary of issue

- 3.1 As part of ECC's COVID-19 recovery plan and forming one of the key foundations for driving future growth in Essex, ECC must actively pursue and drive the further expansion and improvement of digital connectivity across Essex. This is necessary in order to meet the increased demand for fast internet access, to support the post COVID-19 momentum for digitally-driven business models as a driver for economic recovery and to establish Essex as a place with excellent connectivity which is attractive for businesses and individuals, growing the local economy and promoting the wellbeing and prospects of Essex residents.
- 3.2 Intensified infrastructure deployment activity will create additional jobs in the Essex supply chain in the short term and more widespread availability of faster internet connections will support more rapid business recovery and expansion via remote working and the use of digital tools, creating jobs related to digital skills or sectors. In addition, the UK Centre for Economics and Business Research now predicts that 25% of the workforce will work from home by 2025 and this shift may help to create 1.2 million jobs.

- 3.3 In order to achieve fixed and mobile internet coverage for all parts of Essex and to drive an accelerated pace of deployment for full-fibre and 5G connectivity, it is necessary for ECC to focus its efforts on helping develop the commercial proposition for telecommunications networks to invest in the rural areas. This can be done, subject to compliance with applicable legislation, by offering financial help or by creating and driving consumer demand through projects and community engagement or by facilitating engagement between the network operators and the Essex public sector to clearly set out Essex' economic priorities and to remove or mitigate any blockers or barriers to speedy deployment.
- 3.4 It is proposed that ECC supports this digital connectivity drive for Essex by focusing and articulating the objectives for developing a digital economy in Essex and supporting businesses and the public sector in the adoption of digital tools and services, in particular 5G technology.
- 3.5 The project will consist of the following elements:
- I. Develop a Digital Connectivity 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.
 - II. In parallel with the strategy development, to implement a number of immediate steps and activities as follows:
 - a. Develop a summary view of Essex' economic recovery/growth objectives and the associated vision for digital connectivity in Essex and start developing a market engagement programme to share this with the commercial operators to influence rollout decisions and drive potential collaboration initiatives.
 - b. Develop a plan to establish regular engagement with mobile and fixed telecommunications network operators seeking to:
 - 1. obtain a clear view of their coverage and plans
 - 2. understand how ECC can support and accelerate commercial deployment
 - 3. explore the use of ECC's assets and buying power to stimulate commercial connectivity investment in ECC's strategic priority areas
 - 4. explore any collaboration projects, specifically for the deployment of 5G;
 - c. Based on feedback from network operators, work with ECC business areas (e.g. estates, highways) and/or partner organisations (e.g. district planning) to seek any immediate actions that would support a faster mobile rollout in Essex.
 - d. Establish and maintain close engagement with government departments, in particular the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DSMS) to position Essex as a leading and proactive authority in the deployment of digital connectivity.

- e. Identify and seek to exploit grant funding opportunities to implement specific digital connectivity initiatives in line with the (emerging) Digital Connectivity Strategy for Essex.
- f. Explore and articulate what role enhanced connectivity such as 5G or full fibre connections across Essex will play in future corporate connectivity needs including service transformation and corporate networks within ECC and the wider Essex public sector.
- g. Create and implement a Communications Plan for this initiative to create a Digital Connectivity Strategy for Essex, including a launch announcement and ongoing stakeholder engagement plan to include public sector as well as industry and business and community engagement activities.
- h. Define and begin to implement engagement with the wider Essex public sector, seeking to identify common objectives and implement a consistent approach to digital connectivity

3.6 In order to drive forward the proposed Project, it is proposed that a dedicated cross functional ECC team be created as soon as possible to progress the immediate actions listed above and develop a Digital Connectivity Strategy for Essex. It is anticipated that this team would comprise colleagues from Superfast Essex, Economic Growth, Commercial Services, Technology Services, Planning, Property, Essex Highways, Communications and Finance.

3.7 In addition, there will be a need for a funding allocation of £200,000 to support this work, over a period of six to eight months, specifically to cover the following elements:

- a dedicated project manager: £70,000.
- a dedicated programme management officer: £40,000.
- legal support and other professional fees: £40,000.
- technical consultancy support (to draw in national and industry expertise, learning from other places): £50,000.

3.8 The development and implementation of this project (strategy development) does not involve any procurement of goods or services and it does not involve changes to ECC services. All recruitment, consultancy and support activity will follow applicable legal frameworks and standard ECC policy, as will any market activity that may have procurement or State Aid implications.

4. Options

4.1 **Option 1: (Recommended)** to draw down £200,000 from the technology reserve in order to create a cross-functional team to develop and implement the Digital Connectivity Strategy for Essex. ECC has an opportunity to position itself as the thought leader and market engagement lead for digital connectivity in the Essex public sector. Such engagement, active support and collaboration with the industry will help to make Essex an attractive place for rapid infrastructure investment, creating additional local jobs and a competitive local economy.

- 4.2 **Option 2:** (not recommended) Do nothing. If no action is taken, ECC will fail to take advantage of the momentum for digital and online services created by the COVID-19 pandemic, thus deepening the negative impact of the crisis on the Essex economy. Digital connectivity is now seen as a key foundation for economic growth and in order to build a competitive advantage for the County, Essex needs to keep pace and exceed the speed of digital infrastructure deployment in the region and the UK.

5. Issues for consideration

5.1 Financial implications

- 5.1.1 The total requested investment of £200,000 covers a time period from the beginning of July 2020 to estimated completion of between December 2020 and end of February 2021. It is proposed that this is funded from the Technology Solutions Reserve.
- 5.1.2 The costs are estimates based upon the anticipated requirements and skillsets needed to complete the work. Progress against the stated objectives will be monitored closely, ensuring value for money is being delivered in the timescales expected.
- 5.1.3 The estimated costs are set out in section 3.7 and cover resourcing needs such as Project management, Programme Officer, Legal, Technical and consultancy support.
- 5.1.4 It will be the intention to expedite the activities required in a timely manner and potentially reduce the costs if some of the tasks can be completed earlier than anticipated. Conversely, some contingency may be required given that this is an ambitious project and there could be a risk of unexpected additional costs.

5.2 Legal implications

- 5.2.1 All drawdowns from reserves must be approved by the Cabinet Member for Finance.
- 5.2.2 Some of the proposals contained in this report have legislation implications, such as the Public Contract Regulations 2015 and State Aid. All activities must have prior consideration and appropriate advice before market engagement to ensure that ECC remains legally compliant and does not compromise future commercial opportunities.

6. Equality and Diversity implications

- 6.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

- (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.

6.2 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).

6.3 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.

7. List of appendices

7.1 Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA222290799)

8. List of Background papers

None.

I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.	Date 27 July 2020
Councillor Chris Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance	

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Executive Director, Place and Public Health Mark Carroll	22 July 2020
Executive Director, Finance and Technology (S151 Officer) Stephanie Mitchener on behalf of Nicole Wood	2 July 2020
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer) Laura Edwards on behalf of Paul Turner	20 July 2020