Report to Cabinet

25 July 2023

West Sussex County Council Digital Infrastructure Strategy 2023 - 2030

Report by Director of Place Services

Electoral division(s): All

Summary

Our Council Plan (2021-2025) and Economy Plan (2021-2024) contain strategic commitments to improve digital infrastructure in the County. These are being delivered by the council's Digital Infrastructure Team which is working with District and Borough councils to achieve countywide coverage of gigabit-capable broadband and accelerate investment in infrastructure that can enable sustainable economic growth, societal and environmental outcomes and better public services.

The Digital Infrastructure Strategy (2023-2030) sets out in more detail what the council intends to do to ensure connectivity is future-ready and capable of underpinning a strong and vibrant economy that attracts businesses and people to visit, live and work in West Sussex. This countywide strategy will be led by West Sussex County Council (WSCC) working in partnership with District and Borough councils.

The Strategy also serves to invite partners in Government, the telecoms market, industry, and academia to collaborate creatively with the County Council to drive digital connectivity forward at scale and pace.

Recommendation

The Cabinet is asked to endorse the West Sussex County Council Digital Infrastructure Strategy 2023-2030.

Proposal

1   Background and context

1.1   Since 2013 West Sussex County Council has been leading on delivering improved digital connectivity in the county, initially partnering with central government's national Broadband Delivery UK programme and Openreach to maximise coverage of 'superfast' broadband.

Since 2018 WSCC has delivered a countywide agenda in partnership with District and Borough Councils to accelerate investment in fibre broadband via the West Sussex Full Fibre Programme which was refreshed in 2021 to the OpenDigital programme. This Digital Infrastructure Strategy builds on the successful foundation of partnership working with the district and borough councils of West Sussex.

1.2 WSCC continues to recognise the importance of high quality, accessible and affordable digital infrastructure in supporting the county's future growth. Our aim is to move beyond ensuring consumers have access to broadband services at home and work (fibre to the premises/home products) and to realise a broader regional landscape of digital connectivity that will support businesses and sectors to innovate and grow sustainably. As councils, we play a fundamental role in shaping our digital future by lowering barriers to entry for commercial investment, creative pathfinding with private and public partners, and leading on sustainable digital placemaking.

1.3 We are building on a bedrock of strategic investment in fibre broadband which we have steered both publicly and commercially in providing connections to homes and businesses, and increasingly we are accelerating mobile network operators' interest in expanding mobile coverage in the county and are now exploring wireless opportunities.

1.4 The Government's Digital Strategy (October 2022) and subsequent Wireless Infrastructure Strategy (April 2023) both emphasise the need for 'world class digital infrastructure' to underpin its ambitions to develop into a global science and technology leader, as well as to create economic resilience, connected communities and achieve carbon neutrality. Both strategies recognise the important role Local Authorities play in championing local digital agendas, increasingly moving beyond ensuring equable broadband and mobile coverage to leading initiatives to accelerate commercial deployment of advanced technologies (5G, future 6G, IOT (Internet of Things) and AI (Artificial Intelligence)) by working with the market to aggregate demand and ease deployment of connectivity.

1.5 The Government's Wireless Infrastructure Strategy (WIS) places 5G and future 6G technologies front and centre of its strategy which is aimed at securing nationwide coverage of 'standalone' 5G by 2030 and preparing for further generations of connectivity.

1.6 The purpose of the Council's Digital Infrastructure Strategy is to:

1.7 show Government that we continue to be forward thinking, collaborative and able to work strategically at a regional level and demonstrate leadership in the digital space

1.8 show funders that we welcome innovation, are agile and have strong delivery partnerships

1.9   make a clear statement to the telecoms market that we want to continue to work with them to successfully enable commercial investment and are mature in this respect

1.10   signal to investors that we understand the importance of well-planned future-ready digital infrastructure when making commercial investments

1.11   show residents and businesses that we are continuing to work hard on improving connectivity in the harder to reach areas

1.12   signal to all that we embrace new and emerging digital technologies (eg 5G, satellite and wireless solutions) that will unlock benefits for individuals and enable growth as a region.

2   Proposal details

2.1   New technologies are emerging, government focus and funding is increasingly prioritising innovation to support the country's economic growth. West Sussex needs to show its continued leadership of the digital agenda if it is to attract inward investment and support the county's economy.

2.2   Our digital infrastructure strategy sets out ambitions for the county aimed primarily at DSIT (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology), funders, suppliers, investors as well as being accessible to business and residents in terms of current and future connectivity needs. It has 3 strategic priorities:

- **to enable future-ready infrastructure that will support our diverse economy and stimulate growth and innovation**
  We will plan for future demand, consider next generation solutions and work creatively across sectors enabled by our open access approach including fibre, dark fibre and 5G networks.

- **to enable the creation of connected places, unlocking value for communities, businesses, public services and the environment**
  We will enable infrastructure deployment needed to unlock the economic, societal and environmental benefits associated with smart places now and in the future. This includes the digital foundations that can enable digital public services and public sector innovation.

- **to improve access to connectivity in hard-to-reach areas, reducing the digital divide and unlocking the potential of our rural economy**
  We will explore alternative local connectivity solutions that make a real difference in the short term while waiting for BDUK's[1] national Project Gigabit.

2.3   The OpenDigital programme led by WSCC, working in partnership with District and Borough councils will be the vehicle for delivering the strategy. This programme will continue to be led by WSCC's Digital Infrastructure Team. Delivering through this open framework has already had positive outcomes for

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[1] Building Digital UK, an executive agency, sponsored by DSIT

West Sussex which can be scaled up by continuing to work collaboratively across the private and public sectors.

3   Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

3.1   DSIT is our primary funding source and expects to award funding to Councils that are able to demonstrate strategic digital plans within a regional and UK context. If WSCC does not share its digital infrastructure ambitions through the Digital Infrastructure Strategy, opportunities to secure external funding to support innovation and economic growth will be impacted. Potential commercial investors in fixed broadband, mobile and wireless services may also be deterred. Without an understood countywide approach, it is likely that District and Borough Councils would equally be constrained in attracting digital funding, thereby significantly impacting economic growth and reducing the county's attractiveness to inward investors.

4   Consultation, engagement and advice

4.1   The Digital Infrastructure Strategy has been created in consultation with partners in the countywide OpenDigital Programme including District and Borough Councils, central government through the former Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Building Digital UK (executive agency of DCMS, now Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, DSIT), market engagement with broadband, mobile operators and representatives from the Independent Networks Cooperative Association and Cooperative Network Infrastructure.

4.2   Comments have been sought from the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee and shared with the Cabinet Member responsible for Digital Infrastructure. Comments will be fed back verbally at the Cabinet meeting on 25 July 2023.

4.3   WSCC continues to have ongoing dialogue with specialist leads in DSIT, now home to Government's policy on digital connectivity. Our Digital Infrastructure strategy aligns with the Government's own ambitious strategic approach and signals our ability to not only keep pace but continue to demonstrate our forward thinking in defining the county, and the wider region's, digital futures.

5   Finance

5.1   The WSCC Digital Infrastructure Team and its District and Borough partners have a successful track record in securing competitive funding and commercial investment to grow the county's digital infrastructure. The Digital Infrastructure Strategy will help us build on these successes and leverage further opportunities.

5.2   The Digital Infrastructure Strategy will be delivered by the OpenDigital programme led by the WSCC Digital Infrastructure Team working in partnership with District and Borough councils and closely with Government and with the telecoms industry.

5.3   The OpenDigital programme is funded partly through the County Council's base budget (core team funded at £377K in 2023/24) and the 2019/2020 Retained

Business Rates Pilot awarded to the 8 councils of West Sussex[2] in a pooled arrangement by the then Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government (MHCLG). Funding through the business rates pool is secured until 2025. Beyond 2025, further funding will continue to be sought from external sources to finance capital investments in delivery projects and/or resources required for delivery or, if not successful, will be considered as part of the Council's annual budget setting process.

5.4   The WSCC Digital Infrastructure Team leading on the delivery of the strategy is comprised of both permanent core staff and fixed flexible term staff to allow for resourcing flexibility as projects develop.

6   Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Not attracting investment in future-ready digital infrastructure	The Digital Infrastructure Strategy outlines how WSCC will continue to work with public funding and private investors to accelerate the deployment of broadband and mobile connectivity, ensuring that the county's diverse economy is supported to grow, and businesses are able to innovate. The Strategy shows the countywide digital agenda is forward thinking and progressive with WSCC taking a strategic lead, a key component in attracting central government funding and ongoing dialogue with telecommunications suppliers.
Potential reputational risk of supporting 5G deployment	Commercial plans by operators to deploy 5G services has met with some community resistance and some planning applications for telecommunications equipment have not been approved based on local opposition. WSCC supports deployment of 5G and will influence positively the investment decisions of suppliers via appropriate programmes of work that enable the delivery of the Digital Infrastructure Strategy. Deployment will align with the government's ambition for nationwide coverage of 5G by 2030: UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) Communications Strategy will manage risk to WSCC's reputation by sharing national public health guidelines and explaining the technology and demonstrating benefits realised in the county.

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[2] Adur and Worthing Councils, Arun District Council, Chichester District Council, Crawley Borough Council, Horsham District Council, Mid Sussex District Council, West Sussex County Council.

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Digital divide growing faster in rural areas	The Strategy prioritises improving access to digital connectivity in rural areas to reduce the digital divide and unlock the potential of the county's diverse rural economy. Action includes lowering barriers to commercial investment by identifying and aggregating demand for services as well as supporting central government's Project Gigabit to build fibre broadband services in hard-to-reach areas and exploring alternative methods of publicly funded connectivity in the meantime.

7 Policy alignment and compliance

7.1 Our Council Plan – recognises the importance of future-ready digital infrastructure in supporting a sustainable and prosperous economy. The plan outlines working with the government and telecommunications market to accelerate investment in gigabit-capable digital infrastructure and support economic growth and innovation. WSCC's activity to lower barriers to commercial investment includes amending local policy to enable the siting of telecommunications equipment on publicly owned land and assets. In addition, digital connectivity has been identified as an increasingly important lever for economic development, regeneration and growth in feedback from the businesses.

7.2 Legal implications – The Council does not have statutory and legal responsibilities with respect to increasing digital infrastructure in the county. The Strategy aligns with central government policy (Digital Strategy 2022, UK Science and Innovation Framework 2023 and Wireless Infrastructure Strategy 2023) and will adapt to reflect relevant public legislation such as the Electronic Communications Code (amended 2022).

7.3 Equality duty and human rights assessment – The Strategy prioritises activity to enable connected spaces that serve both the people and places of West Sussex, ensuring digital equality for all. This includes reducing the digital divide in rural areas of poor connectivity to tackle both disadvantage and inequality based on lack of access to online products, services and relevant public services. Projects and activities delivered via the Strategy are intended to improve digital connectivity for residents and businesses individually and collectively, as well as at public sites.

7.4 Climate change – The Strategy supports commitments in the council's ambitious Climate Change Strategy to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2030. Projects and activities delivered via the Strategy will support carbon-saving opportunities such as reduced commuter travel and flexible working across the county by enabling remote working online, together with environmental monitoring that can support biodiversity and carbon capture. Commercial land and sea activities such as food production and logistics can also be supported to reduce carbon emissions.

7.5 Crime and disorder – The Strategy enables digital infrastructure that is available for the public sector to work with other agencies e.g. Police and public safety teams to enable positive actions to increase community safety. Also, to

plan better public protection by enabling real time monitoring and analysis of data that predicts risks e.g. at crowded events or environments.

7.6   Public health – The Strategy enables digital infrastructure that is available for the public sector to work with other agencies e.g. NHS, Charities, Community Groups, Environment Agency to enable positive actions to increase Public Health outcomes e.g. by sharing OpenData that makes air and water quality monitoring visible, supporting the coordination of active travel schemes and healthy public spaces.

7.7   Social value – The Strategy's purpose is to achieve countywide coverage of gigabit-capable digital connectivity and accelerate investment in infrastructure that can support sustainable economic growth and enable innovation ecosystems as well as positive action on climate change, habitat restoration and provide for better public services. Additionally, procurement of any contract awarded for the purposes of building gigabit-capable digital infrastructure will include requirements around local employment and local access to improving digital skills and increasing learning opportunities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Digital Infrastructure Strategy 2023-2030

Background papers

None