

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date 21 February 2019**

**Subject:** Strategic Projects Portfolio

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor A. Lion

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**Recommending:**

**That the report of the Strategic Projects Portfolio Holder be noted.**

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## **Accommodation Strategy**

Work is continuing on the delivery of the transformation plan. The Officer Steering group will produce a prospectus for the council offices to explore potential use as a 'public service Hub', maintaining footfall on the high street and co-locating public services that residents can access in one place. In addition, officers are exploring the use of the top floor as an incubation/business start-up centre to aid entrepreneurs in the district to take their enterprises to the next level. Officers are looking to find an external partner with experience in innovative delivery in this sector to manage and market this space.

## **Digital Innovation Zone**

The DIZ, which was established by Epping Forest District Council, with the remit to attract external investment and look at better ways to use digital to support local economic growth, continues to develop its work programme.

The last Smart Places Seminar, which reviewed the opportunities for ensuring the garden communities planned in the region were digitally resilient and fit for purpose, was successfully hosted at Chesterford Research Park in Saffron Walden. This was the largest event in the Smart Places series attracting almost 80 delegates from across eastern Hertfordshire and west Essex, and beyond. The purpose of these events is to share expertise and experience and bring those planning and delivering services together to aid joint working and coordination of investment. (the seminar conference report is available from the Economic Team). The feedback from this event will be incorporated in the Digital Innovation Strategy.

Work continues on the Digital Innovation Strategy which has been drafted with the support of ARUP. This is a key document that will be used to underpin bids for external funding and set out in some detail the strategic plan and practical steps that can be taken to make the local economy more 'future proof' and provide better platforms to deliver services in the future with external partners. The Strategy is funded by a consortium of 12 partners but is led by the One Partnership and EFDC. Members and officers are in a process of taking the strategy through the decision-making committees of neighbouring councils, and have just given evidence to East Herts Council Overview and Scrutiny Panel which has endorsed the plan.

The DIZ is currently seeking funding to undertake a Digital Census of resident's views, experiences and any barriers to the delivery of digital services. Market research agencies are being approached to undertake this innovative project, the data will be used to inform joint service planning and as baseline information for external bids. This will be a joint funded project.

A core element of the DIZ is to seek external investment that individually partners would be unable to access. A bid to develop a Full Fibre Network to link up more than 100 GP surgeries across west Essex and eastern Hertfordshire is being pursued and has already passed through the first stages of approval with DCMS. This seeks approximately £2.1m in government funding to bring the capacity for ultrafast speeds in surgeries, supporting the delivery of e-health initiatives and encouraging the private infrastructure provider to build out their networks from these points to neighbouring properties and deliver a better offer to local residents.

DCMS have recently awarded £25m (with an additional £25m potentially available at a later stage) to the West Midlands Combined Authority as part of the Urban Connected Communities Programme to develop 5G testbeds and trials. It is anticipated that DCMS will soon launch an equivalent initiative aimed at a Rural Connected Communities Programme and representatives of the DIZ have met with officials at DCMS to explore the opportunities for cross border partnerships such as the DIZ, which brings together partners from business, health, councils, education and the voluntary sector, to successfully bid. This work is ongoing.

### **London Stansted Cambridge Consortium**

Regular monthly meetings are held with the Director of the LSCC to ensure the district has influence on the work of the partnership and that its priorities and actions support the district's emerging plans. Members and officers also attend the meetings of the Board and the Officer Steering Group. Discussions are underway on the council taking a leading role in skills development in the corridor area. The council has participated in discussions with the LSCC and neighbouring councils to explore the establishment of a cross border, cross sector platform to promote and coordinate economic development in the area between London and Cambridge, similar to those operating elsewhere in Essex. This work is ongoing.