

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-067-2020/21
Date of meeting: 11 March 2021



Portfolio: Finance & Economic Development – Cllr. J Philip
Subject: Digital Infrastructure Investment for Economic Resilience
Responsible Officers: John Houston / Mike Warr (01992 564472)
Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That Cabinet notes and endorses the contribution of the digital infrastructure investment approach, developed and pursued by the Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) and EFDC Economic Development team, to the economic resilience of Epping Forest district and the district's ongoing recovery response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and**
- (2) To agree, in principle, the potential investment of up to £35,000 of partnership funding to explore an IoT project with the Connected Places Catapult and Digital Catapult to monitor air quality at and on route to school gates, the funding to come from existing Capital Budget allocations for environmental and climate change related projects.**

Executive Summary:

Epping Forest DC and Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone, which the council initiated, has been working, since its formation, to deliver digital infrastructure investment across the DIZ geography, including in Epping Forest District. The council, working with its partners at Essex CC and with the private sector has helped lever in approximately £24m in investment in digital infrastructure in the district. Key achievements in this work programme are set out further in the report.

This investment is considered critical to current economic development and the district's future economic resilience and is a fundamental underpinning layer to support the Council's ongoing work to recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The infrastructure is central to maximising the ability of the district's residents and businesses to engage in an increasingly online world whether that is through delivering goods and services online, working from home, studying from home, shopping locally using online platforms or accessing vital public services digitally.

Additionally, the DIZ has been working to build the reputation of the area as a place to invest and progress on this workstream is also set out in the report.

Building its reputation has led to an approach from Connected Places Catapult to potentially

fund an Internet of things (IoT) project focused on air quality at and on route to schools. The project would analyse and identify patterns in air quality in order to engage with, and influence the behaviour of, school children and their families in respect of healthy and sustainable travel to school. Public health is a key priority for the Council and this project would seek to enable residents to make informed decisions about how they might improve their health and living environment through the choice of alternative routes and transport. The DIZ is liaising with partners over the funding requirement for such a project and this report seeks Cabinet approval in principle for the council to potentially be the single or prime funder for such a project. Approval is sought for up to £35,000 funding for this project, the funding to come from existing allocations of resources in the Capital Budget for environmental and climate change related projects.

Other Options for Action:

A reduced maximum investment in the air quality project could be agreed. This may impact on the council's ability to secure participation in the project. The council could also choose not to agree any funding for this project which would mean any participation would be dependent upon other organisational partners of the DIZ choosing to fund the project and locate the pilot site within the district

Report:

Background:

1. Investment in appropriate infrastructure has long been a key element of economic performance and resilience. In recent years digital infrastructure, such as broadband networks, has become increasingly important to the extent that almost every aspect of daily life for our residents and businesses is reliant in some way on our digital infrastructure.
2. This investment is considered critical to supporting current economic development and the district's future economic resilience. It is a fundamental underpinning layer to support the Council's ongoing work to recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and deliver significant economic, social and health benefits to the district's residents and businesses.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought our reliance on digital infrastructure into even sharper focus with more and more people working from home, with schools and colleges required to move towards home-based remote teaching and learning and restrictions on high street businesses driving more and more retail activity online, whether that is to purely online businesses or as a lifeline for high street businesses looking to continue trading during periods of lockdown. In January 2021, NESTA highlighted a report that showed whereas the proportion of people working exclusively from home in the UK was less than 6 per cent at the beginning of the year, this number rose to a staggering 43.1 per cent in April – and at the end of 2020 remained at around 31 per cent.
4. The Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ), a partnership established by Epping Forest DC, in collaboration with Essex CC and now representing local authorities across Broxbourne, East Herts, Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford districts brings together the public sector, health, education, community and voluntary sectors as well as private sector enterprise to encourage investment in place, attracting investment collectively that would otherwise not have been available to the member organisations acting independently. The partnership is driven by the DIZ Programme Manager, currently seconded to the partnership from Epping Forest DC, and the DIZ Programme Director, a role undertaken by the EFDC economic development lead officer. It is supported by an EFDC Higher Level Apprentice.
5. The DIZ has worked over the last four years to attract investment in critical digital infrastructure, critical both to the economic success and the ongoing economic resilience of its partner districts, including Epping Forest. In addition, this infrastructure investment supports the promotion of digital and social inclusion across the district, supporting the most vulnerable to ensure they too can access the benefits of an increasingly digital world.
6. **Key achievements of the DIZ include the following:**
 - Securing £1.7m DCMS funding for a Local Full Fibre Network (LFN) 'Ultrafast GPs' project to deliver a 'gigabit capable' full fibre broadband network to around 80 GP surgeries across the DIZ, including 20 surgeries in and around Epping Forest district. This is due to complete by the end of Q1 2021/22 and will make 'fibre on demand' available to an additional 11,000+ residential and business premises.
 - As a result of working with CVS and health sector partners to develop a MHCLG bid for a digital inclusion project, £178k of funding has subsequently been secured from the NHS Charities Fund which will see a pilot project across West Essex address digital inclusion through access to equipment, skills training and, critically,

connectivity. Voluntary Action Epping Forest is linked into this project through WECAN and the project will also dovetail with the council's digital buddy programme to support the delivery of digital skills training.

- The DIZ has directly linked up with Newcastle City Council as part of a project funded by MHCLG to support recovery post-COVID-19. The project is exploring the use of CCTV systems to produce footfall analysis of the high street and the use of that analysis to provide residents, through an online platform, with the information they need to make informed decisions about a safe return to shopping on the high street. It is planned that the pilot exercise will take place on Epping High Street early in 2021 and work is in progress involving EFDC's ICT and CCTV teams, as well as the DIZ Programme Manager, the Urban Observatory and Newcastle CC to deliver this.

7. **Epping Forest DC Local Interventions**

The DIZ Programme Manager also leads on behalf of Epping Forest DC on a number of key local initiatives:

- Through support for the latest phase of the Superfast Essex ultrafast broadband delivery, works are being delivered which will provide gigabit capable broadband to around 1800 premises throughout Epping Forest District that currently do not have access to superfast connectivity. This is due to complete by December 2021 and is co-funded by the Council with BDUK, Essex CC and Gigaclear, a total infrastructure investment in the current phase of over £15m.

- The previous phase of the broadband delivery saw around 4,000 premises connected up to fibre broadband, in a project, again co-funded by EFDC, BDUK, ECC, and Gigaclear that represented a total infrastructure investment in the district of £7.5m.

- The DIZ Programme Manager is liaising with a national infrastructure provider and coordinating with Housing, Estates and Legal Service colleagues from Epping Forest DC to explore the potential to support a commercial broadband project to deliver fibre broadband to all of the EFDC-owned blocks of flats. This would see over 400 blocks of EFDC owned flats provided with a full fibre broadband network, fully funded by the commercial provider, and capable of delivering ultrafast internet connectivity.

8. **Reputational Development – A Place for Investment and Collaboration**

In addition, and in order to further advance its ability to attract investment, the DIZ has sought to build a reputation for innovation and collaboration. This has also resulted in a number of initiatives that impact across the DIZ:

- In October 2020, the DIZ was recognised by Digital Leaders as one of the #DL100 list of digital leaders in the UK. From over 700 nominations, the DIZ was included in the Top 10 Cross-sector Digital Collaborations and this led to the DIZ subsequently being named as the '**Cross-sector Digital Collaboration of the Year**', beating off competition from organisations such as the Cabinet Office Geo-Spatial Unit.

- Following its success in securing funding for the LFFN 'Ultrafast GPs' project the DIZ was approached by NHS Digital to share its learning from the project and to assist them in preparation of their business case for further fibre investment for the health network

- The DIZ has also been approached by health colleagues from the NHS in the East of England to share its experience in establishing the partnership and to explore how this might be further developed to support similar innovation amongst health

organisations across wider Essex and potentially Hertfordshire

- East of England LGA will shortly be presenting at the DIZ Advisory Board meeting with a view to exploring how the digital work programmes of both organisations might support each other and promote recovery from COVID-19

- The DIZ has recently been approached by Connected Places catapult to discuss participation in its IoT4LA (Internet of Things for Local Authorities) programme (see below)

9. **IoT4LA (Internet of things for Local Authorities) programme**

As part of early consultations with local authorities for the IoT4LA, the DIZ has been exploring, in conjunction with the Connected Places Catapult (CPC), a potential project based around air quality monitoring at, and on route to, schools. The proposal is to place air quality sensors at school gates to monitor air quality levels across the day and highlight peak time issues resulting from increased traffic and drop-offs / pick-ups. In addition, the project would explore the potential for children to be given wearable / portable sensors (eg. on a school bag or scooter / bike) that could measure the air quality along their route to school and not only highlight problem areas but also be used to suggest alternative healthier walkable routes that children and parents could take.

10. CPC have indicated that funding of £35,000 would be required to participate in the programme although discussions are ongoing at CPC over whether this requirement might be adjusted in the light of feedback from local authorities including DIZ partners and collaborators. This funding would secure all the necessary SME expertise, IoT equipment and project management and delivery by the Catapults. It is possible that the costs could be shared for a single location amongst participating partners and the DIZ has approached both Herts CC and Essex CC about potential collaboration. The DIZ has also spoken to authorities further afield about potentially running a wider number of parallel projects. However, it could be also be possible for a single partner authority to fund the project.
11. Epping Forest DC has a responsibility to address issues of poor air quality across the district. EFDC has recognised the importance of air quality to the health and wellbeing of its residents and green infrastructure in the area. This pilot project and expansion beyond it can provide a further platform to develop this work. The project would analyse and identify patterns in air quality in order to engage with and influence the behaviour of school children and their families in respect of healthy and sustainable travel to school. Public health is a key priority for the Council and this project would seek to enable residents to make informed decisions about how they might improve their health and living environment through the choice of alternative routes and transport.
12. It is proposed that the project be scoped in such a way as to make the identified solution portable so that that it can be utilised, not only at other school venues but, potentially at other key air quality locations around the district. In this way it will hopefully be able to support other Council air quality, sustainable travel and public health workstreams elsewhere in the district.
13. Participation is not guaranteed, and will be determined by CPC and the Digital catapult however, in order to be prepared when the programme is formally announced and opened up, Cabinet is asked to approve in principle the use of up to £35,000 of Epping Forest DC funding to support the delivery of the project in the district at one of

the local schools. The funding requirement for the project is to be met from within existing allocations of resources.

Resource Implications:

The £35,000 funding requirement for this project is to be met from within existing allocations of resources. A Capital Budget allocation for environmental and climate change projects would be used to fund this project.

Legal and Governance Implications:

An appropriate contract for the delivery of the project by Connected Places Catapult, Digital Catapult and the contracted SME on behalf of EFDC would likely be required.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

The project would provide evidence of air quality issues faced within the district, engage with and influence the behaviour of school children and their families in respect of healthy and sustainable travel to school and enable residents to make informed decisions about how route they can improve their health and living environment through the choice of alternative routes and transport.

It is proposed that the project be scoped in such a way as to make the identified solution portable in order that it can be applied, not only at other school venues but, potentially at other key air quality locations around the district.

Consultation Undertaken:

None

Background Papers:

Available from Economic Development Team / DIZ Programme Manager

Risk Management: