

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-008-2021/22

Date of meeting: 12 July 2021



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Finance, Qualis Client & Economic Development – Cllr. Philip

Subject: Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone Annual Report

Senior Leadership Team: Nick Dawe (07939 449512)

Responsible Officers: John Houston / Mike Warr (01992 564472)

Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To receive and comment on the Annual Progress report of the Essex & Herts Digital Innovation Zone; and**
- (2) To provide guidance on the district's longer-term digital ambition around place-making.**

Executive Summary:

The award-winning Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) was established by Epping Forest DC and is supported and led by EFDC officers and members. The key roles of the DIZ are to make this area the best connected place of its type in the UK, attract and deploy investment in digital infrastructure from the public and private sectors and to encourage that the greatest value is derived from this investment through using it to allow; more flexible business activity, increased community engagement and skills and knowledge sharing, and specific purposes such as the GP practices and Hospitals being better connected.

The DIZ Annual Progress Report sets out the partnership's work programme over the last twelve months, highlighting key achievements and challenges, as well as initiating a discussion on future priorities.

Members comment and feedback on priorities for the future work programme of the DIZ are sought.

Other Options for Action:

Not to comment on longer-term digital ambitions.

Not to refer the report to the Stronger Place Select Committee.

Report:

1. Digital is now the critical infrastructure for business and every-day life. The pandemic has caused a massive shift and increase in the transformation of how business and life is conducted including across health, education, shopping, home working, social networking etc. The work of the DIZ throughout the pandemic to support public service delivery and business response and recovery, as well as work to address digital exclusion, is highlighted in the attached DIZ Annual Progress Report (Appendix 1).
2. The district's previous investment through the Superfast Essex programme in superfast broadband infrastructure and, particularly, the investment in gigabit capable fibre broadband put the district in a healthy position to be able to work through this transformation. With projected superfast coverage of +99% this also includes over 70% of gigabit capable coverage against a national average of 36%. Officers are continually monitoring the take-up figures for these new improved services which remain lower than anticipated. Whilst responsibility for maximising take-up remains with the commercial operators and Superfast Essex, the DIZ will be looking at learning from other places and, in discussion with partners, how we can support an enhanced take-up programme.
3. The full implications of the recent transformational changes are not yet fully understood and joint work through the DIZ is still required to understand the challenges and opportunities they will bring. Further member guidance on prioritisation and approaches in the longer-term to influence the joint work programme is sought and it is recommended that the DIZ Annual Progress Report also be taken to the Stronger Place Select committee for additional review and comment.
4. The Ultrafast GPs Local Full Fibre Network project is an exemplar project that perfectly illustrates the DIZ approach to infrastructure investment, enabling an area such as the DIZ to attract funding for investment that brings benefits for more than one sector but which individual sectors could not have attracted working alone. Led by Epping Forest DC the project secured £1.7m of DCMS funding and will serve 76 GP surgeries, including 20 in Epping Forest District, with future-proofed gigabit capable connectivity. This will underpin the future delivery of digital healthcare but will also uplift the level of high capacity digital infrastructure in the areas around the surgeries, bringing 40,000+ premises within scope of 'fibre on demand' making these areas more attractive to businesses and residents.
5. The DIZ has also secured £188,000 of NHS Charities funding to deliver an innovative digital inclusion project across west Essex. Led by DIZ partners from the Voluntary and Community Sectors with support from health and local authority partners, the project will explore the creation of an all-encompassing digital platform including a 'databank' model of community contribution towards the provision of digital connectivity to those most in need.
6. A DIZ Special Interest Group for Town Centres, led by DIZ partners Broxbourne BC and Uttlesford DC, has been formed to examine and recommend potential digital high street interventions that will support the recovery of our local town centres beyond COVID-19 and equip our high street businesses with the tools and skills they need in order to thrive over the next few years. EFDC has already undertaken significant work on new digital platforms, particularly in town centres, using central Government funding. 'Click-It-Local' and 'Loyal Free' programmes have been purchased and work

is ongoing on the deployment of the 'Maybe*' platform

7. The attached DIZ Annual Progress Report (Appendix 1) captures the key achievements of the DIZ over the last twelve months and provides further details on the key projects that have been and continue to be delivered.

Resource Implications:

The DIZ approach is to lever in significant external investment on digital infrastructure so that these costs do not fall primarily on the district council. To date, this has enabled approximately £20m+ of infrastructure investment to the district unlocked by EFDC direct contributions of approximately £434,000. The district council's annual contribution to the DIZ remains at £10,000 per annum. An additional £80,000 of external core support is received from four other district councils and two county councils.

Legal and Governance Implications:

None

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

The work on infrastructure and new ways of working demonstrates that digital enablement has a crucial role to play in the council's ambitions for a safer, cleaner greener district. New opportunities and applications are coming ot market rapidly in all these areas and are enabled by the council's and partners' previous and current investment in infrastructure.

Consultation Undertaken:

None

Background Papers:

Available from the DIZ Programme Manager

Risk Management:

None