

Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Thursday 10 November 2022

Digital Infrastructure in Staffordshire Update

Recommendations

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Endorse the update and approach being taken in deploying the Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework
- b. Note the further areas of consideration and improvement being developed in support of the Council's overall digital first strategy.

Local Member Interest:

N/A

Report of Cllr Simon Tagg, Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change

Summary

This report provides a six-month update on the Digital Infrastructure in Staffordshire report presented to this committee in April 2022 and provides further details on plans for the utilising the infrastructure and enabled technology, it is primarily for the information of members.

Report

Background

1. The Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework (DISF) presented as part of the Digital Infrastructure in Staffordshire report to this committee in April of this year was agreed at Cabinet in June, it set out key objectives to deliver improved connectivity and realise the benefits for Staffordshire businesses and residents.

National Context

2. Further to the background set out in the DISF, the national importance of digital infrastructure was highlighted when the new prime minister stated '*the country needs to build "roads, homes and broadband faster" with more investment in towns and cities across the country*'.

3. Some interesting facts to note (UK statistics)

- a. Only 36% of over 65s have a smartphone
- b. 42% of children did not have access to a device or connection in 2021 for education
- c. 6% of the population remain completely offline
- d. 82% of jobs are now online but 15million do not have digital skills
- e. 2 million struggle to afford their broadband
- f. Digitally literated people save an average of £230 on their household bills per year

Staffordshire Context

Superfast Staffordshire

4. Superfast Staffordshire Programme was a partnership between Staffordshire County Council, Building Digital UK (BDUK) and Openreach to deliver the Superfast Broadband programme across the county. This programme has now completed both phase one and phase two of the projects and the contracts are being closed. Approximately 83,400 (24%) of premises in Staffordshire have gained access to superfast broadband (>24Mbps) services as a result.
5. Overall coverage of services has increased from 65% (2013) to 96.95% (March 2022 – including phase 1 and phase 2 of the Superfast programme) because of the programme. Consequently, we now have over 420,000 premises with access to superfast broadband across the county.
6. The headline figures for the “take up” of superfast services that have been provided by the programme is currently (October 2022) 80.32%, way beyond the 20% originally envisaged. This take up provides the basis of the return on investment in the form of a gainshare to the County Council.
7. The Superfast Staffordshire contracts have concluded their fibre deployment phase having delivered all their contractual commitments. The programme has now transitioned to deliver full fibre (gigabit capable) solutions. Staffordshire currently (October 2022) has 61.5% gigabit capable coverage, of which 32.02% is delivered through a full fibre network.

Digital Infrastructure update.

8. Project Gigabit. Building Digital UK (BDUK) is an Executive Agency of DCMS with a mission to ensure that homes and businesses across the UK can access fast and reliable digital connectivity. One of its main programmes is Project Gigabit, during the recent market engagement exercise for Staffordshire (LOT19) to identify intervention areas, it concluded that there was no market interest in engaging in a procurement in Staffordshire and that any procurement be deferred for a new type of intervention scheme in the medium term. We are currently asking BDUK to provide further detail as to what is meant by 'no market interest', given that the exercise also determined that less than 2% of premises (< 7,000) had no market interest. Furthermore, the exercise identified 17 alternative network providers (Alt Nets) who had interest in investing in infrastructure in the County in the next 3-5 years. We believe that the situation will not prevent the Council achieving its ambition for 100% Gigabit connectivity by 2030, but may have implications on deployment timescales. We will continue to utilise Vouchers in the short term
9. Gigabit Voucher scheme. The voucher scheme is proving to be a popular and successful scheme and is to be renewed by BDUK in December. To date:
 - a. 18 communities (1,056 premises) have gone live with voucher support,
 - b. there are 8 communities (996 premises) in delivery and due for completion and
 - c. 8 further communities (989 premises) have been approved and are now awaiting delivery of gigabit services.
10. Barrier busting approach. The team continue to encourage infrastructure investment by encouraging alternative network suppliers into the County. However, further work is required to mitigate the disruption to vehicle traffic, pedestrians and residences as well as ensuring proper reinstatement of our highways assets. We are working with the Highways team and suppliers on improving communication to residences and businesses impacted by the inevitable construction required as well as ensuring that the suppliers are aware of their responsibilities before they start construction and permits are issued.

Demand Stimulation update

11. The new Gigafast Staffordshire website, www.gigafaststaffordshire.co.uk is now live. The rebranded Superfast site continues to raise awareness around broadband connectivity. It aims to offer unbiased advice and

signposts users to areas such as Ofcom, where to find social tariffs, how to obtain further digital skills (liaising with our training unit, libraries service etc), where to find digital advisors available to give free support to small/medium businesses. The Digital Infrastructure team continues to manage the Gigafast Staffordshire social media channels..

Digital Connectivity update.

12. The Digital Infrastructure team continues to work with other digital teams on how digital infrastructure enables the delivery of digital services to residents and business. This work includes looking at how the Council may be able to take advantage of future internal network procurements such as the Public Services Network which may provide further opportunities to co-ordinate cross government delivery, better access to social tariffs (only 2% of eligible people have taken up social tariffs in the UK) including enhanced tariffs for multiple dwelling units.
13. SCC are now represented in the DCMS - Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator (DCIA) Early Adopters Group (EAG). The EAG comprises a network of Local Authorities that have mobile digital strategies in place and want to understand lessons learnt and best practice from the early adopters in utilising mapping systems, perceived coverage issues and how best to use assets such as street lighting to provide better connectivity. The team has also engaged with our procurement team, legal team, street lighting team, EON (PFI supplier of lighting columns) and a mobile network operators on the practical deployment of improved 4G and 5G mobile services. We are also a member on the ADEPT Digital connectivity group, helping influence future public funded interventions.

Timescale

14. The DISF set out the framework for delivery up until 2030 when we aim to achieve 100% gigabit connectivity. The recent deferral of public procurement for Gigabit supported infrastructure in the County is likely to delay the deployment in hard-to-reach areas. However, the dynamic market for this type of infrastructure (17 separate companies looking to invest), the strategic importance the government have placed upon accelerating the building of infrastructure and the focus we have allows us to believe that we will enable delivery of 100% gigabit service by 2030, with the vast majority completed by 2027.

Link to Strategic Plan

15. A key priority of the Strategic Plan 2022-26 is to improve digital connections and to use digital technology to connect, inform and support

the people of Staffordshire. Digital infrastructure is a key enabler of the ubiquitous use of digital services.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

N/A

Community Impact

The Digital Infrastructure project has a positive impact upon communities as it aims to reduce digital exclusion based upon a person's location and using the website signposts information leading to obtaining digital skills and support.

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Digital Infrastructure in Staffordshire report delivered to this committee - [Agenda for Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Thursday 14th April 2022, 10:00am - Staffordshire County Council](#)

Digital Infrastructure in Staffordshire report delivered to Cabinet in June [Agenda for Cabinet on Wednesday 15th June 2022, 10:00am - Staffordshire County Council](#)

Staffordshire new website signposting digital infrastructure advice to residents/businesses www.gigafaststaffordshire.co.uk

Building Digital UK summer report updating progress on Project Gigabit including results of Staffordshire market test (LOT19) www.gov.uk/government/publications/project-gigabit-delivery-plan-summer-update-2022

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