Summary Report for Cheshire & Warrington LEP Digital Connectivity (DC) Sub-Board

"Local Authority Forum: Digital Connectivity" Conference – London, 20 September 2021

Two NEDs from the DC Sub-Board attended this conference – Connor Diskin and Helen Gopsill. This report summarises the key points raised, and insights gained and aims to provide "food for thought" for potential discussion amongst the DC Sub-Board, and others as appropriate. This could also part-create a pathway, in tandem with other meetings and directives, for the DC to guide not only the LEP but the local authorities in C&W but local businesses and other key players too.

Introduction & Overview

The conference was sponsored by VX Fiber, *"a Swedish technology company with extensive experience building and operating Active Open Access, full fibre networks in multiple countries around the world".* 1

Chairman Mikael Sandberg's opening remarks:

- His company has 20 years experience in driving digital transformation with local authorities
- *"Local authorities play a key role in driving their local and regional digital destiny"*
- *"UK needs to play catch up quickly"* – UK lags behind in many indicators of digital connectivity, including both digital infrastructure and mobile technologies
- *"Many actions are required now – despite the challenge that the benefits may not be realised for 10-20 years"*
- VX Fiber focuses on an open access model of working – separating the owners of the fibres from those who operate them.

Keynote Speaker 1 – Rich Keyte, Building Digital UK (part of Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport), Benefits Realisation and Evaluation Lead

His role is to measure the impact of digital projects that have benefitted from Government financial investment.

BDUK is driving "Project Gigabit" – a £5bn project, aiming to improve UK broadband for everyone.

Rich outlined the BDUK Benefits Framework, against which financial projects are evaluated:

- Enabling public sector efficiency
- Driving economic growth
- Reducing the digital divide/providing public value
- Reducing impact on the environment
- Stimulating broadband demand

Examples and case studies of various successful local authority projects were shared, providing insight as to their positive evaluation under key aspects of the BDUK framework above. It is understood that whilst some benefits can be statistically evaluated, it is early days for many projects and for the fullest evaluation to take place, time and more data will be needed.

Panel Discussion - Connected Places – The role of digital infrastructure in transforming communities, driving economic regeneration and socio-economic outcomes

Panel speakers included:

- Paul Armstrong, Head of Digital Innovation, North Tyneside Council
- Sarah Bazen, Digital Infrastructure Manager, West Sussex County Council
- Theo Blackwell, Chief Digital Officer, Greater London Authority
- Freyja Lockwood, Digital Innovation & Transformation Manager, West of England Combined Authority
- Steve Lovatt, Regeneration Lead Commissioner, Stoke-on-Trent City Council

Questions were put to the panel, who outlined their thoughts on the various topics, and shared some brief insights as to the maturity level of their work on digital transformation.

Through the discussion, the following key points resonated with the two C & W LEP NEDs:

- There is a competitive bid process between local authorities to access limited funds from BDUK – how Local Authorities can still remain collaborative with each other whilst in this competitive process was of concern to panellists
- It is key to help stakeholders to understand the opportunities of digital transformation
- Panellists encouraged local authorities to future-proof digital infrastructure at early stages of projects, despite the future landscape being unclear
- Keeping a focus on the outcomes, and not getting drawn into the detailed complexity of the digital infrastructure or transformation process was stated to be key – ensuring a "benefits-led approach", providing a clear and understandable narrative and rationale for digital transformation projects
- Panellists felt it may be helpful to consider "a digital life" approach – looking at an individual and imagining every aspect of their life digitally transformed, rather than considering a "service by service" approach to digital transformation, as can be typical of the way of working within many Local Authorities
- A question was asked as to whether there are opportunities to link a sustainability/green agenda to digital transformation? Could this provide further basis and access to funding for digital transformation projects from Government?
- To attract private sector funding or resource, different KPIs and language need to be used from those that provide a strong business case rationale to BDUK/Government bodies – typically, they will need to be more focused upon shorter-term return on investment, as opposed to measures such as GDP over the long-term.

Keynote Speaker 2 – Steve Lovatt, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Regeneration Lead Commissioner

"Silicon Stoke" was outlined as a case study.

Having worked in partnership with VX Fiber as their neutral fibre operator, the project has delivered the following – *"the completion of a 113km full-fibre network that has been laid right across Stoke-on-Trent with the opportunity for 5G connectivity citywide, supported through £8.53m of government funding, a gaming hub, a full-fibre academy at Stoke-on-Trent College, as well as a new Digital Academy."* 2

A previous conversation with CWAC Councillor, Richard Beecham, led to a conversation of using unused buildings in Chester as office-based studios rather than traditional outlets. Although every area will vastly differ, it was an interesting concept used by Stoke-On-Trent that could have potential already aligning with one of our local councils future planning.

Not only was it mentioned to seek private sector funding, but utilising the 'neutral fibre operator' network means the operator will also assist in locating that funding.

Keynote Speaker 3 – Freyja Lockwood, West of England Combined Authority, Digital Innovation & Transformation Manager

As a point of reference, Freyja highlighted her background as being in "human factors" within the aerospace and maritime industries – her role now is to ensure that the interface of people and digital transformation is as successful as possible within the West of England Combined Authority.

The issue of risk was discussed – the challenge of how to ensure future risks of digital transformation should be considered so they can be avoided/mitigated, but not so that they stifle progress.

The issue of trust was also highlighted – in that, care must be taken in digital transformation to safeguard stakeholders' trust in the process and the more digital future itself.

The potential to take learnings from "London's Emerging Technology Charter" was highlighted, as this work was felt to provide positive, appropriate dialogue and opportunity for consideration of other, broader issues relating to digital transformation. An extract from the Charter highlighted by Freyja is below:

> "In July 2020 the Mayor of London tasked the Chief Digital Officer for London and the Smart London Board to develop a set of criteria to guide emerging technology in London.
>
> London is a world-leading smart city and we see its future as a global testbed for innovation. It is therefore right that City Hall considers new technologies that could affect how we deliver public services, support our economic recovery, and improve transport and public spaces, and how we work now and into the future.
>
> Our ambition is to ensure these are transparent, designed around the needs of Londoners and meet the highest standards for all Londoners, including privacy and cyber security. We are pleased to share with you this draft Charter. which is based on three key principles to guide discussions between makers and buyers when deploying of emerging technology in the city and provide a framework clear to Londoners on what our expectations are:
>
> *Establish common, open and trusted ways of working between innovators, public services and Londoners when trialling and deploying new technologies*
>
> *Respect equality, diversity and human rights and act lawfully in the design and use of emerging technology*
>
> *Collect, manage, use and share data legally, ethically and securely*" – this final section in italics was quoted by Freyja as being particularly helpful, in her opinion.

The Charter remains in development - see smart@london.gov.uk. 3

Afternoon workshops

Workshop 1 – Financial models

- Various models exist and should be explored thoroughly
- Seek to future-proof the digital infrastructure now – it will be more efficient in the long term, and enables the future to be developed – future digital need and activity will grow to meet the fibre capability that has been laid

Workshop 2 – Governance and mechanisms for change

- Engage widely to ensure that those who are critical to the digital transformation are not left behind, and so that their views can be input to the process
- Develop a clear narrative to ensure widespread understanding of digital transformation opportunities
- Key leaders must be engaged – those within Local Authorities, MPs, and large company business leaders in the region were felt to be critical
- Avoid the risk of "doing nothing" due to the scale of the challenge within digital transformation

Workshop 3 – Digital transformation and social value

- It will be challenging to collate together all the various potential benefits/savings that digital transformation could bring into one business case – mainly due to the silo-ways of working of various Local Authority departments, other groups etc (eg work, education, health etc)
- Nevertheless, a holistic approach to the widest possible definition of benefits should be considered – it was accepted that benefits of digital transformation will not always be financial savings, but will include enablers of major change in various aspects of individuals' and business' life

Finally

There is a strong opportunity for the sub-region to now lead the country into ranking higher in global digital connectivity. This is a complex and demanding task requiring partnership by a variety of parties and stakeholders, a consistent drive and momentum and guidance & leadership.

This leaves us, the Digital Connectivity Board in the Local Enterprise Partnership, a great opportunity not to fund, but to create partnerships, to educate stakeholders and for them to in turn educate residents and for us to be a driving force to enable the sub-region to exploit the opportunity and lead in an area of mixed rural and urban connectivity and the benefits that lay there within.

Report submitted by Connor Diskin and Helen Gopsill, Non Executive Directors

September 2021

References & Extracts

1. Quote from VX Fiber's prospectus "Our Story" page 5

2. Quote from Stoke on Trent City Council's introductory page to Silicon Stoke prospectus
    www.stoke.gov.uk/info/20012/business/445/silicon_stoke

3. Extract taken from "An Emerging Technology Charter for London Version 2"
    www.london.gov.uk/publications/emerging-technology-charter-london