Digital Connectivity and Skills in Cheshire and Warrington – A Review of Governance

Introduction

Improving digital connectivity across Cheshire and Warrington has been an aim of the sub-region for many years, with delivery largely managed through Connecting Cheshire. More recently the Covid pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital solutions and employers have increasingly reported shortages of digital skills and capabilities to meet their demands. The increasing importance of digital infrastructure and capability as enablers of economic activity and growth has already been recognised in the preparation of a C&W Digital Strategy and Delivery Plan, which establishes a shared vision:

"Creating digitally-empowered, connected communities to support, grow and future-proof the vibrant local economy through a digital revolution."[1]

The increased demand for digital is coinciding with an increased level of resource available to the sub-region. Government funding, through the agency of BDUK, has been stepped up under the auspices of Project Gigabit and voucher schemes, with the Cheshire and Warrington procurement brought forward and launched in April 2022. In addition, gain share of £5-£7M is expected to be realised from the first contract awarded in the sub-region to improve digital connectivity. There are plans to recycle gain share into connecting more premises.

The twin drivers of demand and increasing resource have presented an opportunity to review the various governance arrangements with the aim of ensuring that each part supports and complements the others, to maximise efficiency in the acquisition and use of funds to meet agreed identified sub-regional priorities. The current priorities are set out in the Digital Infrastructure Plan.

Digital Infrastructure Plan

The Digital Infrastructure Plan, prepared after the strategy document and published in October 2020, covers a five-year period to 2025. The Plan supports four strategic objectives and priorities, which drive the measures to be delivered within the timeframe.

Objective 1: Enable Gigabit Capable infrastructure across the C&W LEP sub-region, with particular focus on delivery to priority/gap areas, through leveraging commercial and government investment programmes that promote services delivered at a fair price and through an open network infrastructure that attracts a wide variety of retail service providers.

Objective 2: Address areas of coverage inconsistencies and speed/service inequalities in recognition of changing work patterns, a mobile workforce, reliance on connectivity and the convergence of fixed/mobile technologies.

Objective 3: Adopt/strengthen a consistent barrier busting approach to digital policy.

Objective 4: Drive adoption of digital connectivity by increasing participation/skills and takeup of services.

The plan can be accessed at:

Analysis and Plans - Cheshire and Warrington

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[1] Source: Cheshire and Warrington Digital Strategy and Delivery Plan (April 2019)

The objectives set out in the Digital Infrastructure Plan are ambitious though entirely sensible. But they present several governance challenges, for example:

- Where are priorities set and monitored to ensure they remain current?
- Where is programme oversight performed (sub-regional body, council members body, at local authority level)?
- Are there councillors seeking to preserve use of funds within their local geographies and pursuing projects which are inconsistent with sub-regional aims?
- Delivery can be of sub-regional importance and equally at local community levels.
- How do we ensure the views are included from other functions, e.g., Transport, Business Growth, where digital is an enabler for their plans?
- There is limited funding and a lengthy timescale for delivery. When funding is available, how and where are investment decisions approved? If funding for digital is included as part of a County Deal proposal, funding may be less of a constraint, but prioritisation will be necessary due to limited delivery capacity.
- Government funding has been targeted at residential and fixed line (fibre) connectivity, whereas alternate technologies may be more appropriate, e.g., 4G/5G or satellite.
- How do we address digital affordability for those least able to access the new infrastructure?

(Existing) Governance Structures

The table below sets out a proposal for a "single chain of command" and builds on the existing structures playing a role in digital governance. It also identifies through the overlaps of membership how each is connected with the others. Note that while organisations might be represented as overlapping, it does not follow that it is the same individual(s) attend(s) each forum, which risks breakdown in communication. The key functions attempt to clarify the roles which could be performed by each of those structures such that the issues raised earlier are addressed.

Structure	Membership (Highlighted roles indicate overlaps)	Key functions
Sub-regional Digital Connectivity Board	LEP Board member (chair) LEP Board member (Vice Chair) Non-Executive Business Representatives x 6 LEP Engagement board member Chair Connecting Cheshire Warrington&Co Digital Skills Partnership Lead LEP Officers x 2	The Digital Connectivity Board reports to the LEP Board and is responsible for: a) Identifying the priorities for improving digital connectivity across the sub-region which will support and deliver the LEP's vision and wider priorities; b) Influencing those organisations which can help to deliver the priorities, including Government Departments, Local Authorities, Connecting Cheshire, digital infrastructure companies; and

		c) Working with, influencing, and taking account of the issues and priorities identified by relevant sub-regional structures including Employer Skills and Education Board, Digital Skills Partnership, other LEP Boards and partnerships. In addition to the responsibilities above the Digital Connectivity Board also provides relevant advice to the CWLEP on strategic digital connectivity policy, strategies and plans for the sub-region. Approve use of LEP controlled funds for digital infrastructure projects (up to £0.5M)
Connecting (Digital) Cheshire (A partnership of 4 Local Authorities)	CEC – Chair CWaC WBC Halton Digital Skills Partnership Lead LEP Officer BDUK?	Reporting to Connecting Cheshire Board (Councillors/Members)?, Connecting Cheshire is responsible for: a) Delivering improved the digital infrastructure across Cheshire, Warrington and ? Halton. b) Procuring and managing the infrastructure contracts with Openreach and Airband c) Being the primary contact in the sub-region with BDUK d) Evaluating digital project opportunities and (recommending?) allocating resources. e) Co-ordinating local community-led delivery activities. f) Facilitating employer skills workshops (demystifying digital)
Local Authority digital staff / teams	CEC CWaC WBC Halton	Report within Growth Directors structures. Responsibilities include: a) Identifying digital issues within their localities b) Identifying possible projects to improve digital infrastructure and capabilities. c) Supporting local communities to present a coherent digital plan (community led rather than

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		supplier led solutions) to possible suppliers or for funding options. d) Identifying local appetite for group purchasing / broadband "clubs". e) Maintaining awareness of areas of poor connectivity and digital infrastructure to ensure currency for decision making.
Digital Skills Partnership	<mark>LEP Board member chair</mark> <mark>Digital Skills Partnership Lead</mark> LEP Director Skills and Education Employers * 9 LA (Warrington) Training provider (Reaseheath College)	Reports to the LEP Sub Board for Employers Skills and Education. The DSP Board has set its priorities in response to the issues identified through our data and labour market intelligence and within the more general context of the 3 priorities of the Employers' Skills and Education Board, but with a strong digital focus. The DSP's prime objective is to address labour market information failures and 'spread the word about the importance of digital' through making connections, sharing good practice, scaling up and use of data and labour market intelligence. In addition it also addresses the 6 labour market issues found in our analysis. The Digital Skills Partnership Board aligns its work to the 4 workstreams below: a) Addressing information failures and sharing good practice via effective communications b) Response to Covid c) Addressing skills shortages, hard to fill vacancies and the level 3+ deficit d) Addressing inequalities - digital inclusion in particular geographic areas and in schools with high numbers of children eligible for Free School Meals and subject and career gender disparities

Conclusions

This paper acknowledges the concern expressed by Growth Directors that our approach and response to digital infrastructure and skills needs better co-ordination. It outlines possible improvements and invites a discussion that:

- Some digital issues are best addressed on a sub-regional level;
- A "single chain of command" structure is appropriate to manage priorities and delivery;

- That the existing structures are the "right" ones and the issue is about how we co-ordinate them better.
- Whether the functions ascribed to each layer of the governance structure cover fully the functions necessary to deliver the Infrastructure Plan objectives and ensure sufficient stakeholder and democratic engagement in decision making.
- Consider whether the "overlaps" would be better served by having the same individual representing each organisation.