

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY BOARD MEETING

Minutes of the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership Digital Connectivity Board Meeting

held 29th September 2021 at 4.30pm by video conference call

Present:

Nicola Dunbar (chair)	Rupert Collis (vice-chair)	Calum Lewis	Helen Gopsill
Richard Bailey	Connor Diskin	Bill Carr	

In attendance:

Roy Newton	Ian Brooks	Sarah Williams	Eleanor Blackburn
Alex Buckley			

Apologies

Becky Stuttard			
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Members of the Public (for Part A)

N/A			
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Agenda Item 1: Apologies and Introductions

1.1 Nicola Dunbar welcomed members. Apologies were noted as above.

Agenda Item 2: Conflicts of Interest

2.1 No conflicts of interests were declared.

Agenda Item 3: Minutes of the last meeting and Matters Arising

3.1 The minutes of the meeting held on August 25th, 2021 were accepted as an accurate record.

3.2 ND said that the draft Terms of Reference had been approved by the LEP Board, save for one minor change to drafting to clarify voting procedures where there was “no overall majority” rather than a “split vote”. IB will update the T.o.R. accordingly.

Agenda Item 4: Public Presentation

4.1 There were no public presentations.

Agenda Item 5: Feedback on Local Authority Forum: Digital Connectivity Conference

5.1 HG and CD had attended the conference and provided the meeting with a summary report. CD presented the paper adding additional insights and observations from the conference.

5.2 A key thread to the conference was the opportunity for Local Authorities to share investment in infrastructure by partnering with “neutral” fibre providers, i.e., those independent of the internet service providers, thus providing capacity. As that capacity is utilised, there are various models for returns to be shared. Given the lack of direct funding in C&W, this might provide a route to improving infrastructure locally. However, some barriers to achieving investment have been identified, including contracting in traditional functional silos which failed to account of the potential integrated benefits of fibre provision and presenting the benefits of digital projects in a compelling way to audiences with limited skills and understanding of digital.

5.3 CD had, independent of the conference, spoken to Cllr Richard Beecham identifying several possible areas where digital technologies might provide better services and value, including a digitally connected transport system, re-purposing of empty high street premises and providing digitally enabled collaboration spaces. The growth of e-games as an industry presents an opportunity for tourism associated with gaming conferences and competitions.

5.4 BC mentioned that GMCA had dedicated resource for the digital sector and, while Cheshire and Warrington, on the face of it has similar through Connecting Cheshire, in practice the sub-regional resources can get diverted into other projects and priorities.

5.5 CL proposed that as well as working on the supply side of fibre provision, we explore opportunities to co-ordinate the demand side, i.e., to help create a “pull” effect to drive development.

5.6 One example of best practice provided at the conference related to work done in Stoke. It was agreed officers would seek a meeting with colleagues in Stoke to get a better understanding of what they did, challenges faced and overcome, etc.

ACTION RN/IB

5.7 The chair thanked HG and CD for attending the conference at short notice and for their report.

Agenda Item 6: Political Engagement

6.1 ND reported on a meeting held with Esther McVey MP, who has a keen interest in the digital capabilities within Cheshire. EMcV has offered to introduce us to the Minister for Digital Infrastructure (within DCMS), which was set up but will need to be re-arranged after the recent cabinet reshuffle. It will provide an opportunity to discuss how C&W can best present its’ argument for future tranches of funding. She offered to ask a PQ regarding digital, and members were asked to consider what form this might take. One area of concern is perceived deficiencies with the existing “Top-Up” voucher scheme.

ACTION: ALL

6.2 AB provided some background information on the cultural approaches taken by DCMS and BDUK towards funding applications, where MPs interventions can sometimes be helpful, but which should not be universally assumed.

6.3 The sub-region should consider putting itself forward for pilot projects.

Agenda Item 7: Presentation on Connecting Cheshire

7.1 AB gave an informative presentation covering some of the work of Connecting Cheshire and explaining some of the challenges faced by the programme. Focus up to now has been on delivering greater coverage of Superfast broadband (i.e., better than 30MBps) while acknowledging some properties remain with poorer service. Rented property was highlighted as an area of concern, because both landlords and tenants have lower incentives to invest in connectivity.

7.2 The risk was identified that accelerating digital demand, and the Government's initiative to roll out Gigabit capacity, meant that Superfast broadband has a limited lifespan before it will be seen as inadequate. As a sub-region we need a clearer understanding from businesses of when that tipping point might occur and to plan sufficiently ahead of time.

7.3 AB also outlined an investment with Airband of £4.5M with the potential to increase to £10M, depending on funding availability from BDUK.

7.4 AB said in respect of the top up voucher scheme, there is no way to join the scheme at the moment. A resolution is being worked on. He referred to type "A" (smaller) and type "B" (larger) contracts and Cheshire might be included within the scope of the contracts.

7.5 In discussion, it was felt that the LEP could assist in building a single voice on digital for the sub-region, help promote digital on the Local Authority agenda, help provide evidence of 4G/5G coverage and help prepare a pipeline of activities which would enable projects to be developed quickly.

Agenda Item 8: Presentation: Vision "Pyramid" and Possible Priorities

8.1 RN provided context to this item, explaining that the LEP board had completed a vision pyramid and each sub-board had been asked to prepare something similar, to capture how it would contribute to the overall aims of the LEP and delivery of the LEP strategy.

8.2 RN had prepared a draft for the digital board to consider, derived from the Digital Infrastructure Plan and the ongoing work of Connecting Cheshire. He suggested that discussion takes place once members have had an opportunity to fully digest the content, and that it is included as a key item on the next meeting agenda.

ACTION: All

Agenda Item 9: Any Other Business

9.1 There was no other business.

Date and Time of Next Meetings

27th October 2021, 4:30pm–6:30pm (Virtual – MS Teams)

25th November 2021, 4.30-6.30pm

22nd December 2021, 4.30-6.30pm