

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Cllr Paul Sweet (Chair)
Cllr Jonathan Crofts (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Phil Page
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal

In Attendance

Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy
Sarah Middleton, Chief executive, Black Country Consortium Limited
Ravi Kumar, Digital Lead Black Country Consortium Limited
Heather Clarke, Head of External Funding and Digital Projects / Digital Co-ordinator
Julia Cleary, Scrutiny and Systems Manager
Earl Piggott Smith, Scrutiny Officer
Martin Stevens, Scrutiny Officer

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies for absence**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Kaur, Cllr Singh and David Pattison.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 **Minutes of the previous meeting**
Resolved:
 That the minutes of the meeting be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.
- 4 **Matters arising**
A Board Member referred to page 3 of the minutes and confirmed that he had not yet met with the relevant inspector for his area. The Scrutiny and Systems Manager agreed that she would follow this up with Superintendent Inglis.

A Board Member asked if there had been any feedback following the concerns he had raised in relation to the Safer Wolverhampton Partnership website. The Scrutiny and Systems Manager agreed to follow this up with the Community Safety Manager.

5 **Economic snapshot of the Black Country and City of Wolverhampton and an insight into digital activities across the Black Country**

The Board welcomed Sarah Middleton, Chief Executive, Black Country Consortium Limited and Ravi Kumar, Digital Lead, Black Country Consortium Limited.

The Chief Executive provided an overview of digital Activities in the Black Country including:

Superfast and Ultrafast Broadband
Outside In, Full Fibre and LFFN
5G and Beyond
Black Country Digital Strategy and Network
Looking ahead – future opportunities

The Chief Executive explained how the Black Country Consortium (BCC) had adopted an evidenced based approach and had been working very closely with the City of Wolverhampton Council in relation to the digital activities under discussion. There was an underpinning spatial plan along with the Economic Review Report which set out the key measures of success in the Black Country Performance Management Framework. To help deliver the ambitions, there were 12 strategic programmes covering 3 themes:

- People
- Place
- Business

There was a thematic and sectoral approach with 6 priority areas for propositional development and a spatial approach which included in depth analysis of pipeline opportunities in 11 identified spatial zones.

An overview was provided of the Black Country economy and direction of travel and the Wolverhampton economy and direction of travel. There were a few red areas such as the number of apprenticeship starts which had decreased to 8,160 in the Black Country in 2019/20 (-20.8% compared to 18.0% nationally) and to 1,640 in Wolverhampton (25.5%). Data showed that Wolverhampton had a good and strong growth rate in employment data for 2020 which was very positive news to build on and the new qualifications data for the City was also showing fantastic growth about the national level.

The Board were shown a slide highlighting the impact of the pandemic on workers of the who had been furloughed. As of February, there were around 15000 Wolverhampton employees furloughed. This highlighted the need to ensure that as employees started to return to work, that they had the full range of digital skills to allow them to succeed.

It was stated that one impact of furlough was to disguise to some extent the claimant count and that this was something that we all needed to be aware of as it showed an almost doubling of claimants and there was concern as to the impact of this on the

younger generations and in February Wolverhampton had just over 3000 claimants in the 16 to 25 year old bracket. Digital was a really positive way to broaden their skill sets.

In relation to digital there had been significant investment in Broadband infrastructure including 5G and full fibre. The Board were shown a map of the west and east midlands highlighting Next Generation Access (NGA) and internet connectivity. The map showed 4 metropolitan areas including Wolverhampton, the map showed that for high internet speeds, the fibre to the cabinet connectivity across the region looked good. The City had applied for a specific programme but that was not successful which had unfortunately excluded the City from applying to the following programme but there was good news in relation to City Fibre rolling out infrastructure fibre in the City centre. There was good coverage across the Black Country due to historical investment.

In relation to digital exclusion, it was stated that this was a key issue and the main area that needed to be addresses.

Superfast Broadband was a critical platform for the full fibre rollout. The Black Country benefited from a funded Broadband project which connected 61,493 premises in the Black Country to Superfast Broadband between 2014 and 2018. Approximately 9,000 premises across Wolverhampton were connected as part of the project. Wolverhampton City Centre specifically was not included due to a previous application to a Government voucher scheme. Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC) infrastructure was being upgraded to full fibre by Openreach (replacing the copper network), which put the Black Country in a great position considering that 99.4% of the Black Country was connected to Superfast Broadband via FTTC. However, Full Fibre coverage across the Black Country remained desperately low with Wolverhampton showing only 1.87% full fibre coverage. Full Fibre coverage would improve in Wolverhampton with the City Fibre project.

As the Governments focus moved to Full Fibre, it offered an opportunity for the Black Country to utilise its current infrastructure to help accelerate the deployment of full fibre across the region. Outside In related to the roll out of Full Fibre and there was a growth in confidence in the private sector now wanting to invest in Full Fibre.

One initiate through the West Midlands Combined Authority was the 5G programme. The LEP and BC partners input during the bid, which helped the region in winning this opportunity to provide testbeds including manufacturing 5G testbeds with AE Aerospace and a Potential National Tele-comms training Centre. There would also be an accelerator in Wolverhampton. The technology would test how machines talked to machines and how technology could talk to technology and this was critical for the aerospace sector and vital for the local economy.

The Board heard about the benefit of the voucher schemes and it was thought that through the growth hub previous investment and schemes could be built on and the scheme had been effective in targeting not-spots, and SME's in need of broadband connectivity. The Black Country was in the process of updating its Digital Strategy and how it was implemented.

The BCC had also been working with other sectors such as Health and Social Care partners. This included:

- Health pilots in the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust, with Babylon Health, and Sensyne Health.
- WM5G Health / Citizen wellbeing testbed – Care homes project in Newlyn Court, Bilston
- WM5G Health testbed - Capsule Endoscopy pilot at the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust
- AI to help health and social care providers to predict future demand for services
- NHS Digital Social Care Digital Pathfinder Programme

The Board considered the Smart Energy project and drive to net zero. This included:

- Delivering a roadmap to decarbonise the Black Country – with focus on smart
- Identifying locations for zero carbon power hubs
- A business plan for a large-scale energy efficiency programme designed to support manufacturers

There was also an opportunity in relation to autonomous vehicles and Westfield Autonomous POD, this was a Dudley based company but could have national implications.

A question was raised in relation to critical infrastructure and as to what risk assessment had been carried out in relation to this. It was stated that information could be provided in relation to these if required. From a cyber perspective there was a focused piece of work being carried out by the University of Wolverhampton. It was stated that some of the providers would have secure buildings that the public were not able to access. It was noted that at times the cabinets in the streets could be damaged but there were, in most cases backups in place should something happen to these. The Director for Strategy at the City of Wolverhampton Council stated that cyber security was something that the Council took very seriously and it was included on the Council's strategic risk register. The Council had achieved the Cyber Security Plus standard.

A Board Member stated that the Emergency Services communications were extremely important as when things did go down, they needed to operate and it was confirmed that plans were in place across all of the emergency services and contingency plans ready to go into operation should there be any attack on the digital infrastructure. It was also noted that these plans needed to be kept up to date and up to speed as digital considerations grew and expanded.

It was stated that an important area was to enhance visibility of what was happening and being done as a way to start to grow confidence, very often a lot of work was done but perhaps not made as visible as they could be to partners, neighbouring authorities and influencers. A Board Members stated that whilst this was vital, in relation to the Digital Super Towns report from Vodaphone, the top 10 satellite cities were listed and Wolverhampton did not feature, if Wolverhampton wanted to be amongst the best, we appeared to have been missed out. It was vital for us to be out there and in the lead. It was agreed that the report could be taken away to understand why that analysis was as it was to enable better or more focused approaches in the future. It was agreed that as a City it was important to be very honest as to where we were at the moment but to also be ambitious as to our future

plans. It was also noted that the Vodaphone report referred to was dated 2018 and perhaps no longer reflected the position of the Council and its partners in 2021.

Resolved: That the report and update from the Black Country Consortium be noted and received.

6 **Update on Digital**

The Board welcomed Cllr Beverley Momenabadi, Digital Champion, Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy and Heather Clarke, Digital Co-ordinator.

Cllr Momenabadi explained how the pandemic had changed the Council's approach to digital with the sole aim being ensuring that nobody was left behind. The digital inclusion work had started prior to lockdown. In the first wave it was recognised that there was a need for digital devices and connectivity so that children didn't miss out on their education. The Council worked closely with the Department for Education (DfE) to reduce the digital divide by distributing over 1000 4G devices and routers to schools across the City but gaps were already starting to be identified where the scheme wasn't meeting the needs of all of our school children. In some cases, the DfE devices were taking too long to reach children in schools, many schools then gave work on paper to the children, but this was not ideal. In some other cases children did not qualify under the Government's scheme. In some other cases the Children had the devices but not the WIFI or the connectivity to be able to use them. Some parents also lack the digital awareness or competency to help their children with the online access and learning. Due to this the Council launched the WV online project to tackle some of these issues. The project achieved the following:

- 520 digital devices distributed to children and young people during the pandemic
- 60 care homes supported to request iPads to enable residents to connect with family and friends.
- 195 devices lent via a network of trusted partners helping residents get online to access learning, employment support, services and reduce isolation.
- Upskilling residents to enhance digital literacy - including the launch of a family literacy training designed to improve digital literacy skills of parents to support children access remote learning
- Providing support to schools to deliver remote learning to pupils.

Master classes and CPD courses were also provided for teachers as it was recognised how important it was to not only support the children and parents but the teachers as well. There were also a number of sessions and courses for parents so ensure that they had the skills to support their children through home learning.

The WV online lending scheme was considered a great success and devices were loaned to trusted partners in the City to enable their customers and service users to access online services such as online bereavement counselling and applying for jobs. The Panel watched a video of the work done in some schools.

The board noted the dashboard that was available to show where and how many devices had been provided to schools.

Other achievements included:

- Supporting the commercial rollout of full fibre broadband to residents and businesses across the city filling the gap in connectivity in the City Centre, a former not spot.
- 5G being rolled out across the city. A proactive approach has accelerated rollout by 6 months.
- 7703 streetlights upgraded to Smart LED
- WM5G's Citizen Wellbeing use cases around prevention, early diagnosis, emergency response and managing long-term conditions including:
 - 5G Care Home Project: connecting GP's and care homes to offer both video consultation, diagnostic tools & capturing vital sign information to allow for early identification of issues.
 - Pilot capsule endoscopy pilot at The Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust

The Board noted the use of the Digital Wolves Website and the Wolves Tech Aid Scheme which also linked into the Council's Green Agenda.

Wolves Tech Aid supported the digital inclusion agenda whilst reducing waste, it sought to provide equipment (desktop computers, laptops & tablets) and connectivity to school children having to learn at home to stop children losing out on education. Wolves Tech Aid sought donations from individuals and businesses of unused devices to be recycled and distributed to children.

The Council supported this through the provision of drop off points.

Next steps included:

- To continue with the implementation of the Wolverhampton Digital Partnership, bringing together the Council, Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust and University of Wolverhampton to provide an oversight of the digital agenda.
- A revised digital strategy was under development building on Wolverhampton Digital Infrastructure Strategy to encompass innovation, inclusion, economy and skills.
- Further development of the digital inclusion approach including scaling up Wolves Online in terms of number of devices and trusted partners targeting areas with greatest levels of exclusion through place-based approach.
- To continue to build on opportunities such as recently the launched 5prinG Application Accelerator in Wolverhampton to help facilitate collaboration between businesses, entrepreneurs and local authorities in helping to solve problems and explore exciting, commercially scalable opportunities using 5G.

The Board thanked Cllr Momenabadi for an excellent presentation.

Resolved: That the update be received and noted.

7 **Work programme and future work planning**

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager stated that work was underway in relation to planning some work planning meetings for the new municipal year. As yet it was unknown how meetings would be held moving forward and whether they would be face to face or virtual. The Scrutiny and Systems Manager thanked Councillors and officers for all of the work throughout the year in what had been unprecedented circumstances.