CITY OF **WOLVERHAMPTON** COUNCIL	**Cabinet** 23 March 2022

Report title	Digital Wolverhampton Strategy
Decision designation	AMBER
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Obaida Ahmed Digital City
Key decision	Yes
In forward plan	Yes
Wards affected	All Wards
Accountable Director	Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy
Originating service	External Funding and Digital Projects
Accountable employee	Heather Clark Head of External Funding and Digital Projects Tel 01902 555614 Email Heather.Clark2@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report to be/has been considered by	Strategy Leadership Team 8 March 2022 Strategic Executive Board e-decision 10 March 2022 Our Council Scrutiny Panel 19 January 2022

Recommendations for decision:

The Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Approve the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy.

2. Delegate minor amendments to the strategy to the Cabinet Member for Digital City in consultation with the Director of Strategy.

1.0   Purpose

1.1   The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the Digital Wolverhampton strategy, which has been informed by engagement, consultation and pre-decision scrutiny, setting out how we will be 'driven by digital' to achieve the outcomes as set out in the Council Plan, 'Our City: Our Plan' and maximise benefits from digital across the city.

2.0   Background

2.1   The Council adopted the Wolverhampton Digital Infrastructure Strategy in January 2020. Significant progress has been made with the rollout of full fibre broadband underway across the city and 5G mobile rollout accelerated by at least six months, connecting residents and businesses to gigabit connectivity.

2.2   The Council has appointed a Cabinet Member for Digital City to drive forward this agenda supported by the Council's Digital Champion and Co-ordinator.

2.3   A Digital Wolverhampton Partnership has also been established comprising the key anchor institutions in the city: the Council, University of Wolverhampton, City of Wolverhampton College, The Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust, Black Country & West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Wolverhampton Homes.

2.4   Futureproofed digital infrastructure is the backbone of a modern thriving economy driving productivity and spreading growth and in delivering effective and efficient public services. Covid-19 accelerated the adoption of digital services by 2-5 years which are considered critical to level-up our economy to power economic and social recovery.

2.5   To maximise the benefit locally, we need to tackle the digital divide supporting residents to get online, improve digital skills, support businesses to digitalise and introduce smart technology to support the delivery of services. Going forward, digital needs to be considered the 4th utility.

2.6   In order to respond to this, a new Digital Wolverhampton Strategy has been developed and consulted on. This item was also considered at pre-decision scrutiny on 19 January 2022 by the Our Council Scrutiny Panel and will therefore not be available to call in once a decision is made by Cabinet. The outcome of scrutiny is included in section 4 of this report.

3.0   Digital Wolverhampton Strategy

3.1   The strategy has been developed through engagement with the Digital Wolverhampton Partnership and other key stakeholders. It sets out the vision and aims for digital in Wolverhampton acting as a framework to update the city's current Digital Infrastructure Strategy. It will be delivered through a city partnership approach and includes three key ambitions.

- **Wolverhampton is a Gigabit and Smart City** – using futureproofed digital infrastructure, including full fibre broadband and 5G, to transform delivery of services and develop new applications to unlock the city's potential.

- **100% digitally included Wolverhampton** - ensuring all residents have the access to devices, connectivity and skills to take advantage of the benefits digital can bring.
- **Growing the digital economy and talent pipeline** - building on the city's futureproofed infrastructure to start and grow businesses, creating jobs for residents and meeting skills needs for the future.

3.2   To achieve these aims, the strategy focuses around five key priorities:

- Digital infrastructure
- Digital inclusion
- Digital innovation
- Digital economy (business)
- Digital economy (learning and skills)

3.3   For each priority, the strategy sets out the context, key progress to date, specific priorities for action, and how we will measure our performance against delivering them.

3.4   Each priority will have a detailed action plan which underpins our aims and delivery. Action plans will be continuously monitored and updated to ensure the priorities remain relevant, up-to-date and achievable.

4.0   Engagement, Consultation and Scrutiny

4.1   As set out in section 3, the strategy has been developed through engagement with the Wolverhampton Digital Partnership and other key stakeholders.

4.2   A formal consultation on the draft strategy, informed by this engagement, was undertaken between 9 December 2021 and 31 January 2022. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, face to face engagement could not take place, however online and paper-based survey activities were made available via the consultation portal and through city libraries. A summary of the key consultation activities includes:

- 74 responses to the survey and 4 emails

- Children and Families Together Board on 09/12/2021

- Head Teacher Conference on 20/01/2022

- Wolverhampton Equalities and Diversity Partnership Meeting on 26/01/2022

- West Midlands Coalition for Digital Inclusion on 27/01/2022

4.3   A summary of the feedback and how we have addressed this is as follows:

- 75.6% agree and strongly agree with the five key priorities. There was overall support around the importance of digital for the city, and digital is seen as a key area for the future of the city, both for residents and for businesses.

- A key theme from respondents was concern around digital exclusion and that some communities could be left behind. This will be addressed through the digital inclusion

priority, including how we tackle data poverty with affordable connectivity solutions. We have also highlighted the importance of individualised support and help around digital inclusion – one size does not fit all. Ensuring we have a diverse range of Trusted Partners to provide this support to all communities is key.

- 18.9% strongly disagreed with the five key priorities, mainly due to perceived health concerns around 5G. Globally, there is a regular review of the evidence base around the risk of telecommunications. The Council regularly checks this with the national responsible agency, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), formerly Public Health England (PHE), and there is no quality peer reviewed evidence of any association between 5G and harmful health. How we tackle misinformation in relation to 5G and other technology will be included as part of the action plan around digital infrastructure.

- A key area which emerged from the consultation was the importance of setting out the specific benefits to organisations, businesses and local people through the enhanced use of digital. Therefore, in the digital innovation priority of the strategy, specific digital roadmaps for city priorities will set these out – for example, how we will work with our city partners to increase independent living through technology, such as sensors in homes, in order to improve the quality of life of local people.

- The impact of digital on the delivery of services was also raised in the consultation, and this strategy does not assume a 'digital only' approach. Rather, improving our use of digital technology across the city improves choice for local people, and also frees up resources for face-to-face delivery for those that need it.

- A key question which came up in the consultation related to the cost of delivery of digital infrastructure. The rollout of digital infrastructure like 5G is commercially funded, with costs covered by the Mobile Network Operators. A summary of the financial implications associated with the strategy is included at section 8 of this report.

4.4   This item was also considered as pre-decision scrutiny on 19 January 2022 by Our Council Scrutiny Panel. Key areas the panel discussed included:

- The progress in relation to the roll out of full fibre connectivity in the city, which is a key part of the digital infrastructure priority in the strategy. To date, more than 17,000 premises have been connected and as a result of scrutiny, more communications will be sent out to Councillors and other key stakeholders around when full fibre will be available for local residents and businesses to use.

- The panel also scrutinised support, particularly for older adults, in relation to digital inclusion, skills and learning. To deliver the strategy, there are 31 Trusted Partners, who provide individualised support to communities across the city. The network of Trusted Partners is growing, which will be supported by a network of digital champions, and these are specifically referenced in the strategy.

- The panel also discussed digital deprivation, and the strategy includes a map showing the risk of digital deprivation in our city. The Trusted Partner networks will provide digital support to various communities across the city, and there will be a place-based approach to the delivery of the strategy, for example, ensuring public WiFi is available within communities with high levels of digital deprivation.

- The panel also discussed the issue of misinformation in relation to safety of 5G technology, which will continue to be addressed in the delivery of the strategy.

5.0 Evaluation of alternative options

5.1 Option 1: Do not adopt the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy. Whilst the Council has approved the Wolverhampton Digital Infrastructure Strategy in January 2020, a failure to acknowledge the learning from Covid, and need to address broader issues in relation to digital inclusion, innovation and the economy could result in poor outcomes for the city.

5.2 Option 2: Adopt the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy, setting a strategic framework that maximises benefits locally and tackles the digital divide, improving the digital skills and to provide digital support to businesses.

6.0 Reasons for decision(s)

6.1 Option 2 the approval of the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy is the preferred option as it builds on progress made in the rollout of futureproofed digital infrastructure to maximise benefits to the residents and businesses. It supports innovation in delivery of services, growing the digital economy and supporting residents to access job opportunities, as well as addressing the digital divide.

7.0 Financial implications

7.1 There are no new direct financial implications from the strategy but the existing delivery plans are outlined below.

7.2 Digital Infrastructure: The Council has previously secured a capital grant of £4.9 million from the Local Full Fibre Network to connect 170 public sector premises to full fibre broadband. The ongoing rollout of digital infrastructure is commercially funded with the Council performing an enabler and facilitation role. Income from telecoms equipment will be used to address barriers to the rollout.

7.3 Digital Inclusion: Budgets have already been identified to fund the digital inclusion programme, specifically £500,000 within the latest approved capital programme (Cabinet 23 February 2022) and £500,000 revenue from the Covid Emergency Grant Fund (Individual Executive Decision Notice March 2022). External funding opportunities will also be sought to provide additional support to get our residents online working with community partners.

7.4   Digital Innovation: For technology enabled independent living, we will explore opportunities such as the use of disability facilities grant and personal budgets, as well as partner investment and external funding.

7.5   Digital Economy: Alignment to national and regional business support and skills activities with external funding will be sought to support this priority.

7.6   The WM5G 5G 5prinG Application Accelerator, the UK's first commercial 5G accelerator centre is funded by a £500,000 capital grant secured from the City of Wolverhampton Council's Towns Fund allocation. The Accelerator, located at the University of Wolverhampton Science Park, will enable Small Medium Sized Enterprises (SME's) to learn about 5G Technologies to grow and develop new products/services with suitable technical and business support. The Centre will support SMEs, large enterprises and public organisations to understand about 5G, explore how their business can take advantage of 5G technologies and develop new product and services and business plan to implement or commercialise them. The project will support 476 businesses to understand 5G technologies and 116 businesses to create new products and services. [RT/02032022/B]

8.0   Legal implications

8.1   There are no legal implications to the report. However, part of our enabling role for the rollout of digital infrastructure has involved standardised wayleaves, leases and licence agreements.
[TC/23022022/C]

9.0   Equalities implications

9.1   Digital and smart technology could potentially have significant positive equalities implications, for example making it easier for people with health problems to live more independently through the provision of telecare and e-health solutions. Initiatives will be added to our Action Plans and monitored on a regular basis. Lessons learned from each initiative will be referenced in the future.

10.0   All other implications

10.1   **Climate change and environmental**: Digital Infrastructure enabling Smart technology can have positive implications on the environment and climate change, for example enabling the Council to capture environmental information and improve service delivery.

10.2   **Human Resources**: the Council is currently developing a digital skills offer to improve digital skills of the workforce and ensuring all employees have access to digital.

10.3   **Corporate Landlord**: are involved in lease agreements to use Council assets for the location of telecoms infrastructure.

10.4   **Health and Wellbeing**: The approach is in line with the guidance from Public Health England which states that the health effects of exposure to radio waves have been researched extensively over several decades, and very many publications can be found in scientific journals and elsewhere. Coordinated research around the world has addressed concerns about rapidly proliferating mobile communications technologies. Independent expert groups in the UK and at international level have examined the accumulated body of research evidence and their conclusions support the view that health effects are unlikely to occur if exposures are below international guideline levels. Overall exposure is expected to remain low relative to guidelines and, as such, there should be no consequences for public health.

10.5   Fibre broadband will have health benefits arising from increased of technology in the delivery of health and social care and technology enabled independent living. 5G is enabling the opportunity to pilot health use cases including remote diagnostics between GPs and care homes.

10.6   **Covid-19 Pandemic:** highlighted a particular issue around digital exclusion.

11.0   Schedule of background papers

11.1   Cabinet - 22 January 2020 Wolverhampton Digital Infrastructure Strategy

11.2   Cabinet – 23 February 2022, Capital Programme 2021-2022 to 2025-2026 Quarter Three Review and 2022-2023 to 2026-2027 Budget Strategy

11.3   IEDN March 2022, Covid 19 Allocation of Grant Funding

11.4   Our Council Scrutiny – Digital Wolves Strategy – pre decision scrutiny – 19 January 2022

12.0   Appendices

12.1   Appendix 1: Digital Wolverhampton Strategy