

Report title	Digital Wolverhampton Strategy Update	
Decision designation	AMBER	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Obaida Ahmed Digital City and Resources	
Key decision	No	
In forward plan	No	
Wards affected	All Wards	
Accountable Director	Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy	
Originating service	External Funding and Digital Projects	
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Report to be/has been considered by	Strategic Executive Board	13 September 2022

Recommendation for noting:

The Cabinet is asked to note:

1. Progress in delivering the priorities of the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an update on progress in the delivery of the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy.

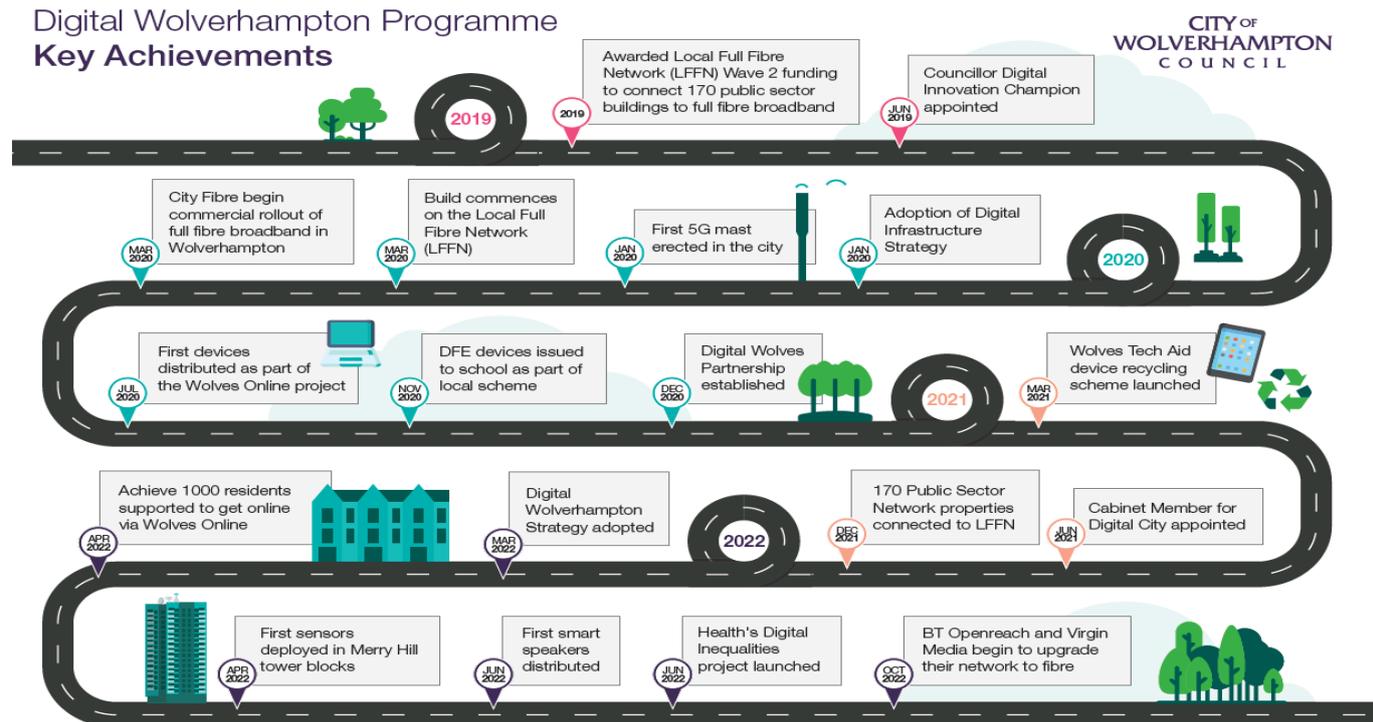
2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Council adopted the Wolverhampton Digital Infrastructure Strategy in January 2020 to support the rollout of futureproofed digital infrastructure including full fibre broadband and 5G. Futureproofed digital infrastructure is the backbone of a modern thriving economy driving productivity and spreading growth and in delivering effective and efficient public services.
- 2.2 Covid-19 accelerated the adoption of digital technology by three to four years (McKinsey). In response to the learning from the pandemic, the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy was developed building on the work around digital infrastructure. The Digital Wolverhampton Strategy was formally adopted by Cabinet in March 2022 to deliver the following aims:
 - A. Wolverhampton is a Gigabit and Smart City with futureproofed digital infrastructure including full fibre broadband and 5G utilised to transform delivery of services and develop new applications to unlock its potential.
 - B. 100% digitally included Wolverhampton ensuring all residents have the access to devices, connectivity and skills to take advantage of what digital has to offer
 - C. Growing the Digital Economy and talent pipeline building on our futureproofed infrastructure to start and grow businesses creating jobs for local residents meeting skills needs for the future.

3.0 Progress in delivering Digital Wolverhampton Strategy

- 3.1 Delivery of this strategy cannot be done in isolation, and the Council established the Digital Wolverhampton Partnership to maximise the benefits of digital for local people. The partnership comprises key anchor institutions in the city including the Council, University of Wolverhampton, City of Wolverhampton College, The Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust, Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Wolverhampton Homes.

3.2 A summary of key milestones is shown below.



3.3 Digital Infrastructure:

- 3.4 Significant progress has been made in the rollout of futureproofed digital infrastructure since the adoption of the Wolverhampton Digital Infrastructure Strategy in January 2020. 170 public sector buildings have been upgraded to full fibre broadband funded by £4.9 million Local Full Fibre Network grant.
- 3.5 Through delivery of the Digital Infrastructure Strategy, Wolverhampton's gigabit coverage (300MB) has increased significantly, from 2% in September 2020 to 93% in January 2022 (Ofcom Connected Nations report 2021).
- 3.6 Full fibre broadband coverage (1GB) has also increased, from 1% of properties in January 2020 to 19% of properties in January 2022. Based on latest intelligence from ongoing deployment in the city as at September 2022, we understand that in terms of premises now passed, performance is now at national average, 33% and will be available for customers shortly. CityFibre are currently commercially rolling out full fibre in the city, and Openreach and Virgin Media have also announced an upgrade of their infrastructure to full fibre starting in autumn/winter 2022.
- 3.7 All Mobile Network Operators have announced rollout of 5G in the city, accelerated by over six months due to a proactive approach.

3.8 Digital Inclusion:

In response to the scale of digital exclusion highlighted during the pandemic, the Council set up Wolves Online, a device and connectivity lending scheme, to support residents get

online. Working with a network of over 40 trusted partners, Wolves Online has now distributed over 1,000 devices supporting over 1500 residents to improve their digital skills.

- 3.9 To support our Trusted Partners, a Digital Champion network will be set up recruiting volunteers to support the delivery of digital skills in the community. Wolves Tech Aid, Wolverhampton's local device recycling scheme, has recycled 325 devices and distributed to children via seven schools. The Council is also working closely with Black Country Connected for a Healthier Future to distribute 800 devices to residents through our trusted partner network.

3.10 **Digital Innovation:**

The city is home to the 5prinG Application Accelerator, supporting organisations to harness the power of 5G to deliver growth and innovation. The University of Wolverhampton's innovation labs and Wolverhampton Cyber Security Institute at the Science Park has recently won Cyber University of the Year. The recently launched National Brownfield Institute (NBI) on Springfield campus is a world-class research centre that provides the facility to develop modern methods of building through innovation and partnership with the construction industry, focusing on the practical application of future brownfield regeneration and remediation.

- 3.11 We are working with a range of partners to support the use of digital to improve delivery of services and quality of life. The Connected Tower Block pilot, led by health partners has introduced 13 heat and humidity sensors with the ambitions of expanding the trial to include Smart Building Management, health, independent living and digital inclusion. 100 sensors will be made available for virtual wards within Wolverhampton. Wolverhampton was also part of WM5G's health use case including remote diagnostics between a care home and GP.

3.12 **Digital Economy (business):**

During the pandemic 76% of Small-Medium Businesses relied on digital, and 52% used digital to sell more and stay connected. Businesses able to channel shift to online trading and secure online customers were more successful and resilient. Based on this learning, Wolverhampton's Business Week 2022 included a range of workshops around innovation including Virtual Reality for commerce, ranking your business at the top of Google, doing business with Amazon, introduction to selling online and digital marketing.

- 3.13 As a city, we are supporting digital innovation in key sectors and their supply chain and supporting the growth of the tech sector through initiatives such as West Midlands Smart City Region Programme to drive new digital start-ups. Supporting business digital needs will be part of Council's iGNITE enterprise hub and future business support offer. Driven by local tech companies, a Creative Chain network has also been established for digital agencies in the city.

3.14 **Digital Economy (skills and jobs):**

Digital skills are crucial for the workplace. The pandemic led to increased digitisation in the workplace, however nationally only 52% of workforce have the necessary digital skills for work (Lloyds Digital Consumer Index 2021). The Council has developed the 'Digital Wolves' website to bring local and national digital skills opportunities in one place. We are also working closely with the City of Wolverhampton College and University of Wolverhampton to develop Digital Wolverhampton Infrastructure Academy supporting local residents into digital infrastructure jobs.

3.15 There are significant opportunities for growth amongst digital businesses with tech vacancies making up a higher proportion of all vacancies in the UK post-pandemic with the average tech salary 50% higher than the average offering significant opportunities for local residents. Access to digital bootcamps are part of the support provided to unemployed residents through Wolves at Work.

4.0 **Evaluation of alternative options**

4.1 Option 1: Do not deliver the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy. A failure to address broader issues in relation to digital inclusion, innovation and the economy could result in poor outcomes for the city.

4.2 Option 2: Delivering the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy will maximise benefits locally and tackle the digital divide, improving the digital skills and to provide digital support to businesses.

5.0 **Reasons for decision(s)**

5.1 Delivery of the Digital Wolverhampton 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.

6.0 **Financial implications**

6.1 As an update on progress, there are no direct financial implications from this report. Delivery of the Digital Wolverhampton Strategy utilises existing budgets as outlined in the Cabinet report on 23 March 2022. £500,000 was approved within the capital programme to fund the digital inclusion programme together with revenue funding from Our City: Our Plan reserve. We are also exploring UK Shared Prosperity Fund and other West Midlands Combined Authority funding to fund additional digital inclusion activity.
[MH/11102022/E]

7.0 **Legal implications**

7.1 As an update on progress in delivering the strategy, there are no direct legal implications from this report. However, part of our enabling role for the rollout of digital infrastructure

has involved standardised wayleaves, leases and licence agreements in line with Electronic Communication Code.
[SZ/06102022/P]

8.0 Equalities implications

8.1 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.

9.0 All other implications

9.1 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.

9.2 The Council is currently developing a digital skills offer to improve digital skills of the workforce and ensuring all employees have access to digital.

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

9.4 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.

9.5 Fibre broadband will have health benefits arising from increased use 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.

9.6 Covid-19 Pandemic highlighted a particular issue around digital exclusion.

10.0 Schedule of background papers

10.1 Cabinet - 22 January 2020 [Wolverhampton Digital Infrastructure Strategy](#)

10.2 Cabinet – 23 March 2022 [Digital Wolverhampton Strategy](#)