REPORT TITLE: DIGITAL TASK FORCE

1 MARCH 2022

REPORT OF CHAIR OF INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP: Cllr Anne Weir

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WARD(S): ALL

PURPOSE

This report provides the Policy Committee with the concluding report from the Informal Scrutiny Group – A Digital Winchester District and provides a summary of the work undertaken as part of this study.

The aim of the study was to explore:

- What a digital Winchester means for the different communities of the Winchester district, including residents, businesses and community groups, organisations and students.

- The benefits of 5G to the city and district.

- The experience of digital connectivity during COVID-19.

The Policy Committee has received updates on the progress of the Digital Task Force at its' meetings during 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Policy Committee are asked to:

1.   Comment on and endorse the A Digital Winchester District ISG report, see Appendix 1

2.   Note the key findings in the report which will be used to influence relevant policies and strategies across the council and beyond

- While there is a strong need for reliable high speed broadband, there is also a relatively low rate of satisfaction with its current provision.

- A clear plan and goal are needed to increase the quality of access, speed and reliability of broadband across the district in order to fully support the economy beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Ongoing investment in infrastructure to support reliable high-speed broadband, and in the development of digital skills, is required to overcome digital exclusion and sustain the journey towards ubiquitous access.

- There are potential opportunities to exploit and deploy digital services in business, education and health sectors.

- EM3 LEP and Hampshire County Council continue to invest in infrastructure – Winchester needs to remain active to ensure it benefits fully.

1   RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

1.1   The work to undertake the Digital Winchester task & finish group activities was delivered by staff resources from the Economy Team, which form part of the wider Economy & Communities Service.

1.2   Digital Islands were appointed to chair the Digital Winchester virtual debate, which took place on 23 November 2021 the cost of which was met from existing budget.

2   SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

2.1   Executive Summary

2.2   The study has shown widespread demand for fast, reliable broadband and for effective mobile coverage – increasingly for 5G. Public consultation indicated only 7 (out of 326 respondents) have 5G mobile coverage, yet 96.43% of the attendees at the virtual debate stated that fast and reliable digital connectivity was very important for them. If 5G is taken as an indicator of digital access, it suggests this represents is a new challenge for digital inclusion.

2.3   While there is a strong need for reliable high-speed broadband there is a relatively low rate of satisfaction with its provision.

2.4   The shift to much higher numbers of people working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for greater digital connectivity, more reliable broadband and more widespread 5G coverage.

2.5   Alongside ongoing investment in infrastructure to deliver a fast and reliable service, there is a need to foster and develop digital skills to overcome digital inequalities which can be a barrier to ubiquitous access.

3   Background

3.1   The importance of Winchester District's digital economy, including access, infrastructure and skills, led the council's Business & Housing Policy Committee to set up an informal scrutiny group (ISG) – the Digital Winchester District Task and Finish group - in Autumn 2020.

3.2   The ISG recognised that the district's professional, technical and service-led economy thrives, and is dependent on, access to excellent digital infrastructure and a highly qualified workforce. Competition for people and for market position is intense, amplified by the impact of COVID-19

3.3   The Group set itself the challenge to:

- Investigate (and define) the digital infrastructure available across the district.

- Identify issues of poor and inadequate access.

- Understand the types, impact of, digital inequalities.

- Learn about the strengths in digital innovation around the district.

- Explore the opportunities for new business – particularly supporting transformation of the economy to carbon neutrality.

- Address public concerns around advancements in digital technologies.

3.4   The objective of the work was to assemble a report and a body of evidence that could be used by the council and stakeholders, to inform decision making, support policy development, and act as a data source to attract potential investment.

4   Approach and outcomes

4.1   Digital Winchester public consultation: A public consultation was undertaken where recipients were asked to share their experiences and views.

4.2   326 individuals responded to the public survey which was hosted on citizen space. The public were offered the opportunity to complete the survey digitally or using paper copies available at a number of locations across the district. 80.6% of the respondents were residents, 15.64% were businesses and the remainder comprised community representatives and students.

4.3   Notably, 62.8% said they required high speed access for working from home pre/post COVID-19 pandemic. Others reported access that keeping in touch with friends and family and internet banking were important to them.

4.4   Only 35% and 34% were satisfied with their broadband speed and reliability respectively.

4.5   A key conclusion is to fully support the digital economy of the Winchester district after the COVID-19 pandemic, work is needed to increase the quality of access, speed and reliability of broadband across the district.

4.6   Digital Winchester Call for Evidence: A call for evidence was published to assemble relevant research and information from articles, published papers, document and options.

4.7   The research collected covers information on infrastructure, digital inclusion initiatives, 5G, case studies, and projects that could enhance the future potential of the digital economy in Winchester. The full evidence library can be found by clicking the link below:

A Digital Winchester
District - Evidence Libr

4.8   The research undertaken demonstrates that there are a lot of case studies in the UK outlining potential solutions. BT have numerous ongoing projects in both urban and rural areas. There are quick wins for 5G boosting, as well as the longer-term solutions to improve connectivity.

4.9   Digital Winchester virtual debate: A facilitated on-line debate was held, supported by a panel of experts, where businesses and residents shared their views and experiences.

4.10 The 90 minute debate took place on 23 November 2021 with over 50 participants from across the District. A panel of expert witnesses supported the facilitated event, including EM3, Hampshire Superfast Broadband (HCC), BT Openreach, Geekabit, Community First and FSB.

4.11 The debate addressed topics around infrastructure; what is key to communities and the economy - including future potential; implications for jobs and working at home; issues around access and inclusivity.

4.12 The key conclusions were:

a)   EM3 LEP and Hampshire County Council continue to invest in infrastructure – Winchester must insure it benefits proportionately.

b)   Winchester needs to focus on achieving "ubiquitous" access.

c) Building digital skills and overcoming digital exclusion are critical for economic health and performance.

d) New and growing opportunities exist to exploit and deploy digital services in business, education and health sectors.

e) If Winchester sets a clear plan and goal for building digital infrastructure and access across the district, this will play a vital part in realising the full potential of the local economy in the years ahead.

4.13 The full Digital Winchester District report, Appendix 1, gives the results in more detail.

5 **Next steps**

5.1 The findings of this study will remain available with the council's website as a source of information for policy makers, investors and influencers.

5.2 These findings will be used to inform and align with appropriate policies, strategies and development plans across the council including the Council Plan, the Green Economic Development Strategy, the Movement Strategy, the Carbon Neutrality Action Plan, Homes for all, and feed into major projects.

6 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

6.1 Do nothing. Given the increase in discussions around the current positioning of the Winchester District's digital economy including access, infrastructure and skills, the council's along with the changing work patterns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was considered that doing nothing was not acceptable.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

Previous Committee Reports:-

Verbal updates at:

Printed Minutes 30th-Nov-2021 18:30 Business and Housing Policy Committee

Printed Minutes 21st-Set-2021 18:30 Business and Housing Policy Committee

Printed Minutes 22nd-Jun-2021 18:30 Business and Housing Policy Committee

Other Background Documents:-

Evidence library can be found on the link below:

A Digital Winchester
District - Evidence Library

The virtual debate heard at https://youtu.be/7oTdeX3gOmY.

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1:   A Digital Winchester District Summary Report