HILLINGDON DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY STRATEGY

Cabinet Member(s)	Councillor Douglas Mills
Cabinet Portfolio(s)	Cabinet Member for Corporate Services & Transformation
Officer Contact(s)	Kelly Walkey – Infrastructure, Transport & Building Services
Papers with report	Appendix 1 – Digital Connectivity Strategy (3 Year Plan)

HEADLINES

Summary	This report sets out a proposed Digital Connectivity Strategy for Cabinet to approve. In essence, the strategy seeks to ensure the Council is 'investor ready' to capture the national progress of digital technologies and infrastructure locally to ensure that Hillingdon is a place with great digital connectivity for our residents and local businesses to thrive.
Putting our Residents First	This report supports the following Council objectives of: *Our People.*
Financial Cost	There will be no direct financial cost to the Council
Relevant Select Committee	Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee
Relevant Ward(s)	All Wards

RECOMMENDATION

That the Cabinet approves the London Borough of Hillingdon's Digital Connectivity Strategy.

Reasons for recommendation

This report sets out a proposed Digital Connectivity Strategy for Cabinet to approve. In essence, the strategy seeks to ensure the Council is 'investor ready' to capture the national progress of digital technologies and infrastructure locally to ensure that Hillingdon is a place with great digital connectivity for our residents and local businesses to thrive. Digital Connectivity will continue to have a profound impact on the way we live, work, travel, connect with others and manage our lives.

Digital Connectivity is increasingly becoming an important consideration in domestic and business location choices. Current data for the Borough is showing the level of Full Fibre at 5%, compared to the average of 13% in West London. Some residents are being impacted with slow and capped speeds due to old infrastructure, which has been highlighted by the pandemic.

As more residents and local businesses operate from a home environment, good connectivity is vital for their daily tasks, but this is also placing huge burdens on the current infrastructure. By uplifting the current copper connections to Full Fibre, this will enable ultra-fast broadband so that Residents can work, shop, learn and entertain without limitations.

Hillingdon's proposed Digital Connectivity Strategy is the enabling vehicle by which the Council will seek to achieve these aims for the Borough working with partners and the private sector.

Alternative options considered / risk management

The only other alternative is to not have a strategy in place, meaning that the Borough's digital infrastructure may continue to remain outdated and presents limitations for residents.

Select Committee comments

None at this stage, however, the Corporate Finance and Property Select Committee has indicated its wish to monitor the delivery of this.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Digital Connectivity

Digital Connectivity (access to the internet) is increasingly becoming an important consideration in domestic and business location choices, particularly as online presence is becoming the dominant commercial and communication channel.

The Government intends to deliver nationwide gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible and aims for the majority of the population to have 5G coverage by 2027. The implementation of this will massively enhance digital capability and performance for the UK and local areas. This will bring new and exciting opportunities and innovations and will have big impacts on sustainability, travel, communications, safety and even health and social care. It will continue the change in the way people work and communicate, and further innovate the way businesses and the public sector deliver services.

The investment required to deliver this digital infrastructure is high and local authorities will need to be 'investor ready' to attract early investment to support this delivery.

We are now living in an era of increasing digitisation across all industries. Mobile and fixed connections to the internet are becoming more and more important to residents and local businesses and is often regarded as the 'new utility' in most people's lives, along with electricity, gas and water. More recently, Covid-19 has sped up and necessitated new ways of working, particularly from home. This has hugely increased digital traffic. Most see this trend set to continue and the Government estimates that digital traffic is set to grow between 25% - 40% per year for

the foreseeable future. Other local authorities are also developing investment strategies, plans, priorities and setting their future ambitions for Digital Connectivity, therefore, it is the right time for Hillingdon to consider the same. These local authorities are also using their enabling role around digital connectivity as a way of helping to regenerate town centres and attracting footfall back onto high streets.

Action to-date

The Council has already taken a number of operational actions to boost the Council's approach to digital connectivity. These include the following:

1. Embedding Digital Connectivity – The Council has established a small new team with responsibility for Digital Connectivity - who act as a single contact for infrastructure providers and to coordinate across the Council. This includes a steering group across council services to accelerate activity.

2. Standard Policies and Protocols   - The Council has developed of a range of standard processes and procedures that seek to ensure that the Borough is easy place for Digital Infrastructure Providers to work with and that we are responsive and coordinated.

3. Development of Wayleave & Open Access Agreements - Officers have worked with Legal Services to approve a Standard Wayleave Agreement to enable providers to provide digital connections into Social Housing blocks. Discussions are underway with various Wi-Fi providers regarding Open Access Agreements that would allow the deployment of 'Small Cells' to enable 4G and 5G coverage.

4. Alignment with West London Alliance (WLA) Digital Programme - the Council plays an active role in 'Digital West' the WLA's group that helps to coordinate and align digital activities and investment across West London. This will enable the Borough to leverage the combined power of the WLA to get the best from the infrastructure providers we engage with and utilise the common data, tools and procurement frameworks to streamline processes.

Planned investment in Hillingdon

This 'investor ready' approach by Hillingdon is already delivering:

1. Openreach - has agreed to invest £2m in the uplifting of two telecoms exchanges, one in Hayes and the other in Uxbridge with further investment into exchanges to be announced. This is in addition to the uplifting of infrastructure of Full Fibre in the Borough's social housing.

2. Community Fibre - has agreed to assist to Full-Fibre the Borough's social housing with the addition of 10 free Full-Fibre connections for community centres, apprenticeship programmes, 3 Ambassadors Volunteer roles to train the community and online training.

3. Telefonica/Ontix – have expressed their desire to upgrade their network availability across the Borough by installing 4G small cells technology which will eliminate the network congestion that has been identified.

4. Hyperoptic – has expressed their desire to assist in Full-Fibre for social housing in the Borough and to offer low cost packages for those on low incomes and other benefits.

Hillingdon's proposed Strategy

To build on the above actions and planned investment, Officers have developed the attached Digital Connectivity Strategy. Whilst largely this sets out the Council's enabling role with partners and the private sector, part of this strategy in will also be in partnership with the West London Alliance to help accelerate learning, to ensure a consistent model, to better leverage investment and to reduce duplication of effort.

The proposed strategy (attached) has been developed around 3 critical and interlinked strands:

1. **Digital Place** - enabling fast network coverage and eradicating low connectivity points for residents and businesses and delivering priority projects in line with the Council's plans. This will improve connections to public buildings and support service innovation and help develop new business connections and new residential connections within Hillingdon.

2. **Digital Council** - encouraging digital investment into the Borough, by being 'investor ready', developing broader Council digital strategies and driving digital innovation. This will include Improved relationships with each Mobile Virtual Network Operator (MVNO), clearer mutual objectives and development of partnering approach. clarity on investment models, priorities and plans and also the removal of barriers and issues.

3. **Digital Inclusion** - enabling independent living and learning, building digital skills and an agile, skilled future workforce. This will ensure that the right information, services and conditions are in place to enable all stakeholders to interact confidently in a Digital Place.

The proposed Digital Connectivity Strategy is fully aligned with the West London Alliance Digital Programme.

Financial Implications

The Council secured grant funding of £92,500 through the West London Alliance Enabling Fund to support the delivery of Digital Connectivity. This income, together with a contribution from the HRA (given that a key area of focus includes the Council's housing stock,) has funded an initial phase of consultancy work undertaken by Agilisys, subsequent subject matter expertise from the same provider and the creation of a 12-month fixed term Project Manager post to help progress the digital agenda as outlined in this report.

Should Cabinet approve the London Borough of Hillingdon's Digital Connectivity Strategy, a further review of future resourcing requirements will be undertaken, together with consideration of the funding options available.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities?

Below are a number of benefits to the communities and residents:

- Faster network coverage and eradicate low connectivity points for residents and businesses using 5G and Fibre;
- Outcomes that will help to tackle congestion, air quality and de-carbonisation;
- To improve digital inclusion to enable independent living and learning;
- Build digital skills and an agile, skilled and digitally included future workforce;
- Enable increased access to services through digital innovation.

Consultation carried out or required

There is a Steering Group established for the Digital Connectivity Project, that meets every month. The Group has recommended the Strategy and support the objectives and outcomes.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance has reviewed this report and concurs with the financial implications set out above, noting that there are no direct financial costs relating to the recommendations contained in this report.

Legal

The Borough Solicitor confirms that approval of the Council's Digital Connectivity Strategy will comply with the Council's obligations under the Digital Economy Act 2017 and the Electronic Communications Code.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL