

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY BOARD MEETING

Minutes of the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership Digital Connectivity Board Meeting

held 22nd March 2022 at 4.30pm by video conference call

Present:

Nicola Dunbar (chair)	Rupert Collis (vice-chair)	Calum Lewis	Helen Gopsill
Richard Bailey	Becky Stuttard (from 5pm)		

In attendance:

Roy Newton	Ian Brooks	Charles Jarvis	Marc Harrigan
Rebecca Luck			

Apologies

Connor Diskin	Kathryn Eade	Eleanor Blackburn	Bill Carr
Sarah Williams	Stephen Fitzsimmons		

Members of the Public (for Part A)

N/A			
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Agenda Item 1: Apologies and Introductions

1.1 Nicola Dunbar welcomed members. Apologies were noted as above.

Agenda Item 2: Conflicts of Interest

2.1 An ongoing conflict was noted for Rupert Collis in that Fisher German are acting for Cadent with respect to Hynet.

Agenda Item 3: Presentation on Astra Zeneca / Starlink Project

3.1 MH, a member of Astra Zeneca’s technology innovation team, presented the work AZ has underway with Starlink. Starlink is a network of small, connected satellites which beam broadband connectivity to receivers, somewhat analogous to satellite TV. Each satellite covers a hexagonal area of the earth (land or sea) as it flies over in low earth orbit, before handing on the signal to the trailing satellite as it leaves the sector and the next one enters it.

3.2 The network is currently being built by Space X and is of particular interest to AZ to provide broadband connectivity in remote regions of the globe that will enable (i) improved delivery of healthcare to communities previously unable to access services, (ii) track shipments and deliveries of AZ

products, which go “off-line” especially when on the sea and (iii) facilitate collaborative working and jobs creation.

3.3 Receivers take the form of a “plug in” dish, slightly larger than a TV satellite dish, which ideally has clear line of sight to a large expanse of open sky. Once subscribed the dish currently creates a connection of up to 200Mbps within a 22km radius hexagon. One installation can, therefore, connect several users. The dish is of a size where it can be re-located relatively easily (providing, in effect, a mobile technology).

3.4 AZ is presently at the proof-of-concept stage and prepared to share knowledge and/or provide demonstrations.

3.5 The current cost of service in the UK is approximately £400 per dish and a monthly subscription charge of £79. Compared to laying fibre to remote areas this is cost competitive but may still be prohibitive for a single residential user. Costs are expected to reduce as other providers, e.g. Amazon, seek to build similar networks.

3.6 The committee was interested to understand better how the technology could compliment others (e.g., 4G/5G/7G) to expand broadband, mitigate loss of services when copper wire is phased out and or provide more cost-effective solutions. CJ drew an analogy to the gas network, with which everyone is familiar, where the majority of premises are connected to hard infrastructure with others “off-grid”. He felt funding availability would be guided by BDUK’s priorities which, at the moment, are fibre to premises and including harder to reach premises.

3.7 Discussion also ranged to raising awareness of SMEs to the uses “big business” are putting technology, or the opportunity that a big estate could offer to provide connectivity across its land holdings to associated residents and businesses.

3.8 ND and the committee thanked MH for an interesting presentation, and CJ offered to follow up to explore how CEC, which provides digital training to SMEs, could work together with AZ.

ACTION: CJ

Agenda Item 4: Minutes of the last meeting and Matters Arising

4.1 The minutes of the meeting held on January 25th,2022 were accepted as an accurate record.

Agenda Item 5: Public Presentation

5.1 There were no public presentations.

Agenda Item 6: Update on Digital Cheshire

6.1 CJ introduced the update by explaining that he chairs Digital Cheshire and Connecting Cheshire, brands which are essentially interchangeable, and which represents a partnership made up for the Cheshire and Warrington Local Authorities plus Halton. It comprises 6 digital specialists and has been responsible for delivering various contracts to roll out improved digital infrastructure in Cheshire and Warrington.

6.2 Current priorities include closing out two contracts with BT Openreach, which will crystallise and secure gainshare, estimated in the region of £5-£7M, and managing the third contract with Airband. The Airband contract was initially for £6M, funded £3M form ERDF and £3M from gainshare and split £1.5M towards supporting SME’s with training and £4.5M towards improving infrastructure.

6.3 The training is being delivered by running 2-3 workshops per month attended by between 8 and 30 SME on each occasion. The infrastructure investment is targeted to deliver higher speed broadband to

a minimum of 3500 residential and 600 business premises. More connections are anticipated due to the subsequent ease of connecting to the networks. Delivery is not without challenges, requiring careful planning and the obtaining of consents and wayleaves to cross third party land, or use third party infrastructure, e.g., telegraph poles.

6.4 After the Airband contract is completed in September 2023, it was estimated that 17,000 premises would remain without high-speed broadband connections. To partially address this, BDUK has agreed to invest a further £2M into the contract, on condition that it is matched by £3M of gainshare, which should permit 2000 extra connections.

6.5 In addition, BDUK has recently brought forward to April 2022, its procurement lot (£170M) for Cheshire. Investment will be prioritised at those properties where speeds are less than 30Mbps and where copper cable is being phased out.

6.6 CJ explained he had recently provided an update to Growth Directors, who had requested IB/CJ review existing structures, the forward programme and resources to make most effective use of funding.

Agenda Item 7: Delivery Plan

7.1 Following a presentation of the LEP's draft 2022-23 delivery plan to the board, RL presented an overview of the approach and the draft section relating to the Digital Connectivity Board. The approach / plan is underpinned by the sub-board pyramid and, with the DCB still in early stages of development, its activities have been placed into the category of influencing and networking, rather than specific delivery items or facilitation and support.

7.2 It was recognised that the measures needed to be Smarter and RC felt that the DCB was in a position to start moving into a more action-oriented phase, for which some new targets could be proposed. CJ suggested that some of the outputs and outcomes for Digital Cheshire could equally be targets for the DCB. Other ideas included helping fund pilot studies or supporting the development of plans and priorities for available investment funds, providing business intelligence and considering the affordability of various technologies (to promote inclusion).

7.3 RN counselled to keep the delivery plan for the board at a high level, with the detail managed by the DCB.

7.4 An action was taken to establish a task and finish group to develop the DCB plan more fully, for discussion at a future meeting. IB/RL will liaise with members over availability and dates. HG and BS volunteered to be part of the group.

ACTION: IB/RL

Agenda Item 8: Board Discussion Forum

8.1 The item was postponed to a future meeting.

ACTION: IB

Agenda Item 9: Any Other Business

9.1 There was no other business.

Date and Time of Next Meetings

April 26th, 2022 4.30-6.30pm via MS Teams