



Purpose: For information

Committee report

Committee	POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS AND REGENERATION
Date	8 JULY 2021
Title	DIGITAL ISLAND – THE ISLE OF WIGHT DIGITAL STRATEGY
Report of	DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 As part of its ambitious regeneration and public service programmes, and acting in its role as community leader, the Council has led the development of a comprehensive strategy and action plan to position the Isle of Wight as a “Digital Island”.
- 1.2 The strategy contains a “road map” setting out the key project interventions under four key headings up to 2022. This report seeks to update the policy/scrutiny committee on progress to date, taking account of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The strategy and its action plan (section 10) are attached to this report as Appendix 1.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Digital technology presents major benefits for Island communities, allowing them to be connected in a way that has not previously been possible. However, the technology that enables innovation, growth and livelihoods also has the potential to create uncertainty and alienation for those who are left behind.
- 2.2 The Council recognised the opportunity presented by digital technology and embarked on a Digital Island Conference in 2017. This inaugural conference set out to understand the potential for digital technologies to address some of the real challenges the Island faced. The challenges discussed ranged from

improving the digital skills of the Island's people and existing workforce, to addressing health and social care issues.

- 2.3 The Digital Island Strategy brought together the momentum gained since 2017 and set out the strategic way forward for the Island to realise the potential opportunity digital technology presents for businesses and communities alike.
- 2.4 The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on progress with the implementation of the strategy action plan in some aspects but in others it has accelerated the objectives and actions. The need to conduct every aspect of day to day life through digital platforms including accessing goods and services, seeing friends and family, and working remotely has supercharged the vision of the "Digital Island".
- 2.5 One of the key reasons the Island has navigated some of the worst impacts of the pandemic has been as a result of the investment in best in class digital infrastructure and the resulting ability to carry on working and delivering services through successful, early adoption by businesses and communities of digital contact.
- 2.6 The pandemic also highlighted the risks of the digital divide, children without adequate access to online teaching, and the loneliness of our most vulnerable unable to keep in touch. The Digital Island approach will learn from the Island experience of the pandemic and incorporate this into the next phase of implementation.

A Digital Island

- 2.7 The Island is undertaking an ambitious transformational programme of regeneration to address some of the structural, economic and financial challenges it faces. As that programme moves forward, and specifically as a result of the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic it is clear that digital technologies will contribute and impact across every single aspect economic, social and environmental well being. This is the case in terms of digital communications; involving communities in planning and implementing projects; in improving our digital infrastructure to enable business growth; or 'designing-in' digital into the physical regeneration of the Island.
- 2.8 Following a 2017 conference, an invitation to encourage delegates to join a **Digital Steering Group** received an enthusiastic response. With the Council, 25 people worked on a virtual digital platform and a total of 30 potential project ideas were identified.
- 2.9 The rollout of The Gigabit Island programme, by WightFibre, to enable full fibre digital connectivity across the Island provides the opportunity to access advanced broadband speeds for the majority of residents and businesses on the Island. The focus now is on the 'not-spot' areas, ensuring all communities are connected. In January 2021 the DCMS announced the Island would be one of the first areas in the UK to benefit from "Project Gigabit" – a specific programme aimed at reaching non commercial areas to enable them to benefit from Gigabit

internet speeds. This project will get underway in 2022 following a national procurement exercise by government in 2021.

- 2.10 The rationale behind the development of the Digital Island is to identify the opportunities where digital technology can be used to enable solutions to regional challenges. Essentially, this is:
- Supporting delivery of existing plans and policies (economic growth, regeneration, carbon, environment, tourism)
 - Supporting digital transformation of Council services
 - Enabling economic growth through digital technology, identifying priority economic areas for growth
 - Identifying key skills required for individuals and businesses to engage with the digital agenda and benefit from the opportunities to grow
 - Building the Island's Sense of Place and overcoming the feeling of 'dislocation'
- 2.11 A key part of the development of the Digital Island is to ensure the technology that enables innovation, growth and livelihoods does not create uncertainty and alienation for those who might be left behind.
- 2.12 The Council continues to seek to utilise available technologies in the provision of health and care services. Enabling older people to live independently and at home longer is a key objective for health and social care services. Use of assistive technology is beginning to contribute to this objective helping to avoid significant costs of having to be placed in residential or nursing care.
- 2.13 The social and economic benefits of a focused approach to the build of digital infrastructure and its strategic application across a range of policy areas are set out in the strategy, evidencing its significance to the achievement of Council corporate objectives, the wider prosperity of the Island and delivery of value for money services.
- 2.14 Following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Digital Solent conference in November 2017 and the Digital Island conference in 2018, the need to recognise the increasing significance of *digital technologies* in every aspect of life and their potential contribution to tackling our key challenges required the development of a strategic approach, informing a set of key actions, for the Council and other stakeholders.
- 2.15 Responding to the UK Government's Digital Strategy, which aims to make the UK a world leading digital economy that works for everyone, the Council has already signed the digital declaration proposed by the UK strategy committing public sector bodies to embracing the development of digital service delivery.
- 2.16 There is an opportunity to build on and accelerate the growing presence of jobs in companies working in the digital economy on the Island (5000+ jobs paying 30% higher than median average wages), jobs that are attracted by the excellent quality of life the Island has to offer, this interest in the Island has increased during the pandemic. These jobs are underpinned by the investment that has taken place in the provision of Superfast broadband over the last five years and

ongoing investment in full fibre providing Gigabit speeds to home and businesses, one of the first places in the UK to provide this.

- 2.17 New companies such as the contact centre provider Ascensos and existing firms such as Rapanui, based in Freshwater and Stainless Games based in Newport, operate in a global, cyber economy not impacted by the Island's physical disconnection from the UK mainland.
- 2.18 As well as economic benefits the successful development and deployment of digital technologies can also contribute to the delivery of better customer facing public services, transport, energy, health and social care and housing. Best in class broadband is now seen as the fourth utility and impacts on the daily lives of everyone living, working and visiting the Isle of Wight. The continuing development of artificial intelligence, the internet of things and real time global communications has the potential to transform the economic prospects for the Island and harness its benefits to improve quality of life for all.
- 2.19 The "Digital Island" strategy (Appendix 1), adopted in 2019, proposed a shared vision for the **Isle of Wight "to be the world's smartest, most connected island."**
- 2.20 To make progress in achieving this vision the Digital Island strategy proposed action in four key policy areas,
- **Digital skills and education** driving the uptake and recognition of the opportunity afforded to increased quality of life by digital technologies as well as the skills required to access services and deliver a digital economy
 - **Economic growth** through digital transformation of existing businesses followed by growth in new companies and attracting new enterprises
 - **Public sector services** addressing the financial pressure on local authority budgets through increased utilisation of digital technologies
 - **Sense of place** using digital technology to attract and retain people and businesses on the Island

3. STRATEGIC CONTEXT

- 3.1 In line with the corporate plan, the impact of approving the recommendations contained within this report, will deliver growth within the economy, more specifically within the digital economy on Island. The strategy seeks to support the Island's improved digital and transport connectivity, education and skills and contribute to the provision of better health and social care services.
- 3.2 The "Inspiration Island" regeneration strategy also outlines the Council's commitment to improving skills and business development, specifically in the digital and technology based sectors of the economy. In developing existing communities and town centres through the provision of new housing, jobs and services, future proofing places through the strategic integration of best in class connectivity is a central objective of regeneration on the Island.

- 3.3 The Health and Well Being strategy has three key objectives for the population of the Isle of Wight – Start Well, Live Well and Age Well. Each one of these three key objectives require the development and successful deployment of digital technologies in learning, housing and care.
- 3.4 The Council's own Digital transformation plan seeks to completely review and revise the way in which the Council uses Information Technology to improve all its services with increasing the range and number of online transactions at the centre of this approach.
- 3.5 All of this effort requires a properly considered strategic approach to managing the increased availability, take up and promotion of digital technologies on an Island wide basis. From a rural business keeping track of crop yields through drone and soil monitoring to grandparents keeping in touch with loved ones on the other side of the world, schools teaching coding as a key skill to integrated journey planning, the ubiquitous impact of digital living further enhances the Island's special status as one of the best, most inspirational places to live, work and visit.

4. Progress to date

- 4.1 This section of the report updates the committee on progress to date to help inform committee discussion on learning to date and recommendations to consider for the next phase of implementation.

- **Digital Infrastructure**

- 4.2 The installation and operation of access to digital mobile and broadband services is provided by infrastructure and operating providers such as BT, Openreach, EE, Virgin and WightFibre.
- 4.3 Businesses and residents are at liberty to purchase access to broadband connectivity and use it as they think fit in undertaking their affairs.
- 4.4 WightFibre's commercial roll out of Full fibre to the premise (FFTP) is nearing its halfway point with nearly 30,000 homes and business premises connected.

- **Digital skills and education**

- 4.5 The new Island skills plan to be published in September 2021 highlights the importance of everyone improving their digital competence. Isle of Wight College continue to enhance the range of courses to individuals and businesses. The pandemic has seen people having to get to grips with online life, perhaps for the first time, breaking down preconceptions and offering a major opportunity for improving take up of digital skills training.

- **Economic growth**

- 4.6 The recent approval of ERDF funding for Innovation Wight, a new business incubation centre and wrap around business support facility based at the council leased BAE site in Cowes and with outreach points across the Island, is a major

step forward in support of the Economic Growth objective of the Digital Island strategy. The first facility of its kind on the Island, the incubation centre will focus on support for new and growing digital businesses and will be open for use in January 2022.

- **Public sector services**

4.7 During the pandemic every public service has adapted to continue to deliver services online or through a combination of face to face and online support. This experience has enabled a complete re-think around how services continue to be delivered as we recover and into the future.

4.8 Health and social care were identified as offering greatest scope for enhancing services using digital technologies pre-pandemic and the capital investment in the NHS trust announced in 2019 focuses on enhancing the digital service offer available on the island.

- **Sense of place**

4.9 As stated earlier the attractiveness of the Island as a place to live and work remotely has been enhanced by peoples experience of urban living during the pandemic. The impact on house prices and availability is the most obvious implication of that interest. The opportunity to harness this interest by promoting the Island as a place to invest is a key objective of the Digital Island strategy. Working with island-based businesses the Council is supporting the development of place marketing campaign.

4.10 Focusing on the Island experience of companies in key sectors the campaign once developed can offer, subject to available resources, a structured approach to attracting more business interest to our digital offer.

4.11 Flagship projects such as the private sector led “Connected Cowes” 5G initiative, which will see the sailing event go digital to drive awareness of marine impact, science in sailing and marine technology to engage the next generation of innovators and sailors, demonstrate the potential of enhanced connectivity to the Island's key sectors such as tourism and marine.

- **Communications**

4.12 Underpinning the strategy is a communications plan seeking to engage different stakeholders on how the strategy affects them and offers opportunities. Progress with engagement on digital issues has been the most affected area as a result of the pandemic. The need to encourage and reassure has been overtaken by the “must use” to survive experience of most islanders. The learning from this will inform a substantive review of this aspect and the committees views on future communications are welcomed.

5. CONSULTATION

- 5.1 There have been two Digital conferences held in 2017 and 2018 to help inform the development of the strategy and road map setting out project interventions. These events were attended by over 300 organisations from the public, private and community sectors both on and off the Island.
- 5.2 A Digital steering group comprising over 25 individuals and organisations has supported the evolution of the strategy.
- 5.3 The development of the strategy itself has been subject of extensive stakeholder interviews and workshops.
- 5.4 The resulting profile of digital issues as a priority for the Isle of Wight has seen significant interest by national and local media and extensive Island conversation about the impacts of enhanced digital connectivity.
- 5.5 In order to ensure appropriate oversight and continue to harness the collective commitment and effort to developing the Digital Island approach a Digital Island board comprising representatives from public service partners and the private sector is still proposed.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Policy and Scrutiny Committee note the progress with the implementation of the “Digital Island – Isle of Wight Digital strategy” and advise relevant cabinet members on next steps, particularly in the communications and stakeholder engagement element of the strategy.

7. APPENDICES ATTACHED

- 7.1 Appendix 1: Digital Island – Isle of Wight Digital Strategy

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