

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY BOARD MEETING

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

held 25th August 2021 at 4.30pm by video conference call

Present:

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

In attendance:

Roy Newton	Ian Brooks	Sarah Williams	
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Apologies

Bill Carr	Connor Diskin		
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Members of the Public (for Part A)

N/A			
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Agenda Item 1: Apologies and Introductions

1.1 Nicola Dunbar extended a warm welcome to all the sub-board members to this inaugural meeting of the Digital Connectivity Board. Apologies were noted as above.

1.2 Each member provided a short introduction to their background, interest in the board and issues relating to digital connectivity and digital access more widely. It became evident that the committee possesses a strong combination of business experience, where digital technology has transformed operations, particularly in logistics, data management and software development, an understanding of the providers and policy making. The board will also co-opt others as necessary.

Agenda Item 2: Conflicts of Interest

2.1 No conflicts of interests were declared.

Agenda Item 3: Public Presentation

3.1 The board is aware of the interest shown by Mr Lee Peters and was updated on correspondence sent by Cllr Louise Gittins following the LEP full board meeting in July. IB informed the committee that there had since been a further exchange of emails between Mr Peters and Cllr Gittins.

3.2 Mr Peters had expressed concern that Connecting Cheshire was not represented among the boards' members and queried some of the statistics quoted in correspondence. RN confirmed that Connecting Cheshire had an ex-officio role and would be used as an adviser. A representative has been invited to join from September, when the board will also receive a presentation from Connecting Cheshire.

Regarding statistics, IB thought it possible all figures may be correct, but based on different definitions. He suggested that as the board becomes more familiar with the issues, a common understanding of each of the measures is developed.

Agenda Item 4: Terms of Reference

4.1 RN explained that the draft Terms of Reference had been prepared using a framework consistent with other LEP Boards.

4.2 He added that the board was fully entitled to call on the support of other experts, advisers or stakeholders as it deemed necessary.

4.3 In response to a question about procuring consultancy or advisors which required a budgetary resource, IB explained that any requests would be assessed by Strategy Committee alongside all other requests and, if successful, funded from strategy projects budgets. Procurement would follow the LEPs purchasing procedures, with appropriate tender arrangements. The board may be required to assist setting the specification of works and consulted on the draft reports.

4.4 The Terms of Reference were approved. Ratification will be required by the LEP Board which can be done by circulation with any additions / disagreement by exception.

ACTION: IB/ND

Agenda Item 5: Presentation of the Digital Infrastructure Plan

5.1 RN provided a short summary of the Digital Infrastructure Plan (presentation attached to the minutes). He explained that the LEP can help identify sub-regional benefits connected with more localised projects. In addition, the LEP has released funds in the past three years to support the production of business cases and, going forward, on the assumption further funding for business cases will be made available by the LEP, digital proposals could be considered.

5.2 It was recognised that commercial infrastructure providers will be attracted to invest (and reduce the requirement for public funds) if demand for high-speed services can be stimulated. Uptake and demand are, among other factors, driven by a capability to exploit the new technologies.

5.3 CL asked for clarification of “barrier busting”, which covers a multitude of issues. Sometimes the barriers are physical, on other occasions it can be resolving conflicting solutions to issues proposed by multiples of stakeholders. RN explained that to gain traction with officials, it is important that the sub-region has consistent “asks” of Government. BS provided the example where different planning and policy approaches by adjacent local authorities can make it difficult for commercial providers to navigate projects to delivery. This is an area where the board might be able to sign post and influence.

5.4 RC wondered whether the Covid pandemic had changed the plan. The general feeling is it has accelerated aspects of the plan, rather than invalidated it, and the plan does not require fundamental review.

Agenda Item 6: Presentation of Digital Skills

6.1 SW presented an overview of the Digital Skills Partnership (presentation attached to the minutes).

6.2 Digital Skills capability is paramount to delivering benefits from digital investment but CL recognised that capability can range from quite basic to complex coding required for e.g. Artificial Intelligence. SW explained that the LEP commissions analyses of the labour market, skills provision and uptake, to help inform where “gaps” exist.

6.3 The board expressed a desire to understand the future funding arrangements to support the enhancement of digital skills. IB explained that public funding to support training can be quite complex; it is for employers to fund business specific training while Government may support generalist education. Much of the recent funding allocated by the LEP has been capital to purchase equipment or develop facilities.

Agenda Item 7: Ideas / Plans for future meetings

7.1 The board agreed that the digital landscape is very broad and that for it to be effective it needs to prioritise issues critical to the C&W economy. The board also felt it would be important to identify how it could support stakeholder engagement.

7.2 RC said that the LEP review may influence the subsequent priorities of the LEP board, in turn helping set the focus for digital connectivity. What matters will be the ability to influence private and public sector stakeholders and drive the speed of roll out.

7.3 Evidence to support argument and opinion will be required including how C&W compares with other parts of the UK. This would help the board understand why the sub-region had not been included in track 1 of BDUK. Also, the board wanted to firm up the messages that would help secure digital investment funding in competition with other economic investment opportunities. If possible, the board wanted to identify relevant key future dates, e.g., for funding rounds.

7.4 RN suggested that he/IB prepared some suggestions for the next meeting which would include. perhaps, how the board interacts with Connecting Cheshire and the Employers Skills Board.

ACTION: RN/IB

Agenda Item 8: Frequency and dates of future meetings

8.1 The board agreed that initially monthly meetings would be beneficial. IB will set up appointments until the end of the year.

ACTION: IB

Agenda Item 9: Any Other Business

9.1 There was no other business.

Date and Time of Next Meetings

29th September 2021, 4:30pm– 6:30pm (Virtual – MS Teams) – already booked in

Suggested (Nicola to confirm)

27th October 2021, 4:30pm–6:30pm (Virtual – MS Teams)

25th November 2021, 4.30-6.30pm

22nd December 2021, 4.30-6.30pm