DIGITAL INVESTMENT PLAN 2023-2026

CONNECTING CHESHIRE

"Striving for Cheshire wide digital connectivity for all and ensure that significant digital economic growth benefits are realised."

Contents

1. Purpose of the Plan

This "Digital Investment Plan" has been developed to set out how the Connecting Cheshire Partnership will deliver digital connectivity, growth and address digital related issues across the region until 2026

2. Background

What is Connecting Cheshire

Connecting Cheshire is a public partnership leading the delivery of improved broadband over the Cheshire region. Since 2012 it has managed the investment of over £40m into fibre-based broadband, has connected over 100,000 premises and assisted hundreds of local businesses.

The partnership comprises the four local authorities of **Cheshire East (CEC), Cheshire West & Chester (CWAC), Halton** and **Warrington Borough Councils** and works with stakeholders to deliver Digital projects, support businesses and residents and provide enhanced connectivity across Cheshire.

What is Digital Cheshire

The ERDF funded Digital Cheshire project comprises two key complementary areas that enable SMEs to adopt these digital technologies and improve both their competitiveness and productivity. Firstly, is a broadband infrastructure deployment component that seeks to address the issues faced by SMEs, that due to their physical location do not have access connectivity at the speeds required for the successful use of many of these digital technologies (measured as sub 30Mbs maximum access speeds), this addresses a fundamental issue preventing adoption.

Secondly there is a business support component that consists of providing SMEs with the knowledge, awareness, and guidance in understanding the technologies that are both available – and appropriate to their individual circumstances, this addresses the key issue of non-adoption of technologies and processes that are vital in improving productivity and competitiveness in both national and international markets.

Vision

Our vision is to strive for Cheshire wide Gigabit connectivity for all residents and to also ensure that significant economic and growth benefits are realised by local business through digital connectivity, engagement and providing a partner wide specialist digital team with an array of initiatives to improve the level of digital activity taking place across the sub region.

The partnership intends to best achieve this vision with a focus on the following key activities:

a) To ensure that all areas with less than 30mbps broadband (sub-Superfast) have the option to access superfast broadband speeds as a minimum, where possible providing a major step change by proving gigabit capable speeds.

b) To increase the availability of high-speed fibre connectivity to other areas where realistically possible and explore alternatives for the remainder.

c) To provide support to businesses and residents aimed at increasing the usage, uptake and realising the significant economic benefits that new Digital processes and opportunities can create.

d) To actively seek digital opportunities which will enhance the sub regions digital footprint i.e. smart initiatives, mobile connectivity, digital inclusion etc.

e) To provide a responsive, specialist team to be both reactive to opportunities and proactive to approaching new projects, trials and funding, whilst continuing to deliver successfully on contracted projects.

The Connecting Cheshire Partnership also realise that strong and collaborative working within and outside the partnership is essential to enable successful delivery. The Digital Investment Plan will enable the evolution of Connecting Cheshire, providing a combined partner wide specialist team.

Connectivity

While the partnership has achieved great success in addressing many problems of poor connectivity in the region, there remains pockets of very poor connectivity across all partner Authority areas. Additionally, Cheshire lags other regions in the provision of high-speed gigabit service availability.

Digital Growth

Beyond physical connectivity it is equally important to ensure that the growth opportunities presented by digital are realised. In order to help achieve this the partnership seeks to undertake further digital business support activities. This support calls upon local experience of delivering targeted business support and direct engagement with businesses to capitalise on the 'digital by default' agenda.

By providing a *'supply chain'* of business support activities the assistance provided will help facilitate the development and create high growth/high tech businesses through enhanced digital knowledge.

Authority Ambitions & Targets

All partner Authorities have their own specific targets and ambitions relating to Digital; these can be specific objectives or broad strategy objectives. Despite the differences in detail all these objectives and issues which need addressing are common and the partnership can assist in delivering against or addressing these issues directly.

Outline Connecting Cheshire targets: Ultimately achieve 100% superfast and/or ultrafast coverage for residents and businesses across the sub region.

- Securing interest to extend mobile coverage across the sub region.
- Provide a specialist digital team for the partners to access for knowledge, insight and delivery of successful project management.

OFFICIAL

- To secure future investment from Project Gigabit in excess of £80m to support the roll-out of gigabit broadband.
- Provide a 'Digital Cheshire' brand and platform for all to access to find the latest developments on digital activities i.e. broadband, mobile, vouchers, business support and digital inclusion.
- Continue to enhance relationships and work positively with BDUK on their funding projects.
- Provide businesses with an opportunity to access support relating to improving their digital footprint.
- Ensure that any completed contracts deliver the correct levels of funding returns at final closure (Gainshare)

CONNECTING CHESHIRE

By 2026, the centralised Connecting Cheshire team aim to:

Successfully deliver the Digital Cheshire contract. (10,000 premise connections to be expected by Airband, both in and out of contract)

Deliver business support interventions to over 250 businesses across the sub region.

Increased take-up of Airband contracted delivery to 40%.

Enabled over 100 active community fibre partnership schemes utilising the top-up voucher fund, supporting them to completion across Cheshire.

Established a new project aligning to the smart cities and towns opportunities available.

Encouraged, established and provide access to a broadband trial for the hardest to reach areas utilising alt-net solutions and vouchers.

Provide residents with access to Digital Inclusion initiatives across the sub region, whilst directly delivering a CCP inclusion programme (subject to funding and need).

Identified additional sources of funding to enable further delivery.

Increase the profile of the Digital Cheshire brand to residents, businesses and stakeholders.

| **Cheshire East** | **Cheshire West** | **Halton** | **Warrington** |

Partnership

The Connecting Cheshire Partnership has been established since 2012 to provide a strategic and operational oversight for the delivery of major and collaborative broadband investment projects in the partnership area, it comprises members from:

- Cheshire East Council (CEC)
- Cheshire West and Chester Council (CWAC)
- Halton Borough Council
- Warrington Borough Council

The aim of the partnership approach is to enable shared resources to deliver and actively facilitate projects and activities effectively. Key intended benefits are:

- Enable shared resources between partners
- Provide technical and professional staff on a shared benefit basis
- Deliver cross boundary projects
- Create a more powerful voice and level of influence with stakeholders and funders
- Share and minimise individual partner risk

3. Finance Background

Finance for current Digital activities has been derived from a number of sources: a regional shared pool of funding derived from previous superfast contracts; ERDF funding; and direct BDUK funding into a "live" contract.. New direct investment by partner Authorities has not taken place since 2017.

Current Digital Funds

'Gainshare' is a mechanism in publicly funded supplier contracts that requires telecoms providers building superfast broadband networks to return excess profits to the public sector, if adoption of their services is greater than originally expected. The first two Superfast deployments undertaken by the partnership and delivered by Openreach have generated a significant level of Gainshare and it is this funding source which currently forms the basis of the Digital funding pool available to the partnership.

	Local Bodies	ERDF	BDUK	Total
Total Funding Available by Source	£9,844,000	£2,154,597	£2,000,000	£ 13,998,597
Allocated Funding (Up to)				
Digital Cheshire (Q4 24/25)	£2,154,597	£2,154,597	£2,000,000	£ 6,309,194
Mapping Analysis (Q4 22/23)	£ 70,000	£ -	£ -	£ 70,000
Voucher Top Up Scheme (Q4 25/26)	£4,000,000	£ -	£ -	£ 4,000,000
	£6,224,597	£2,154,597	£2,000,000	£ 10,379,194
Unallocated Funding	£3,619,403	£ -	£ -	£ 3,619,403

Commitments

Details of committed projects and activities are covered elsewhere (ref. 'Committed Partnership Projects' section within the document)

Additional Sources

The partnership will always seek additional external funding (and other forms of support) from external sources, in particular public funding sources that may become available from governmental bodies. While the ideal may be to seek funding that fully covers any activity or project, it may be that funding requires match and the partnership's own Digital funds could be used for this purpose.

As part of BDUK's Project Gigabit a further investment of more than £80m is expected to be delivered in Cheshire. However, this will be contracted directly from BDUK to the supplier,

therefore the need for further local authority intervention for the delivery of fibre potentially reduces.

4. Delivery & Staffing

The delivery team will be responsible for the delivery of the Digital Investment Plan which includes both current and new projects, the team will also be responsible for administering the programme and reporting to Connecting Cheshire Partnership and local authority members directly.
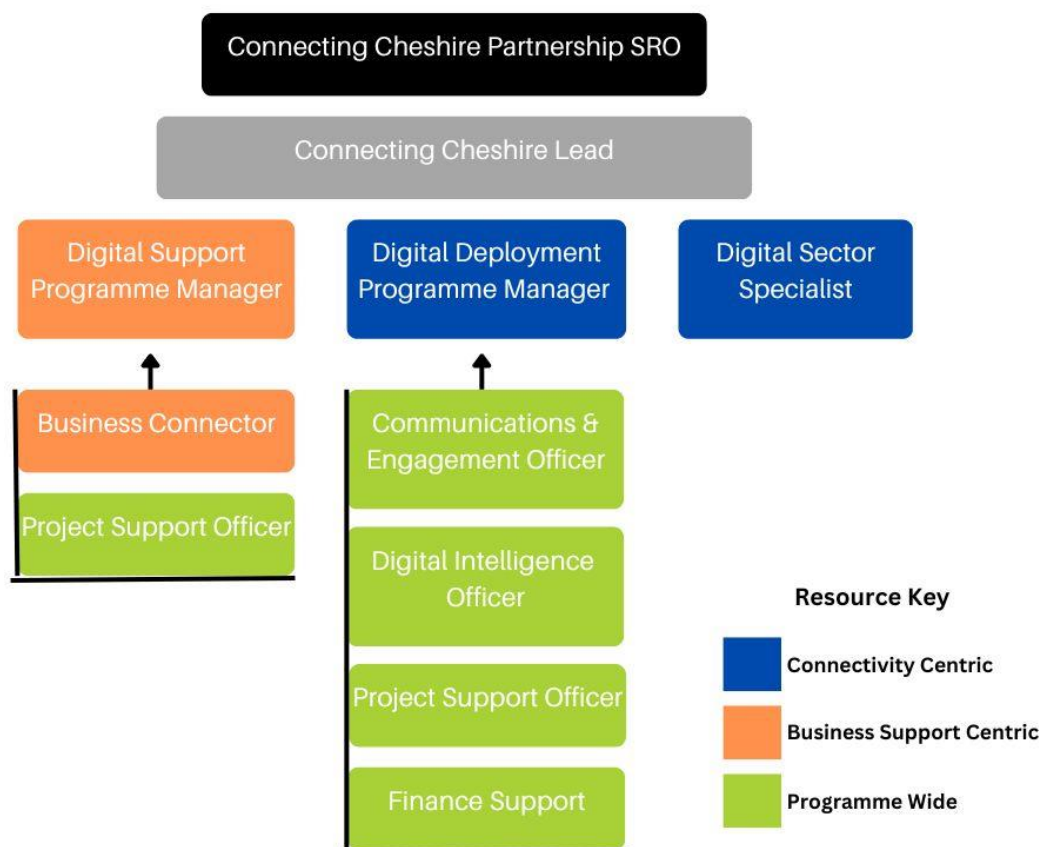
The team will have to possess considerable experience and skillsets in various areas – including local authority, telecoms, procurement, contract management, data analysis, communications, and effective stakeholder engagement. The team will also work with finance, procurement, legal, highways, planning and other key areas in and out of the authority.

Roles & Responsibilities

Digital deployment and support projects are often very technical in nature, rely on fast changing external data and can often include complex delivery mechanisms, legal compliance restrictions and State Aid components. These factors require a delivery team to consist of a mixture of technical and specialist roles to both support projects directly and to support the operations, planning and function of the partnership.

The vision of the team is to be a resource that supports delivery on a partnership wide basis, regardless of whichever Authority is based contractually or physically. It will be funded via the shared digital funding available and therefore not negatively impacted by staffing constraints or issues that may arise in any individual Authority.

Although there is a great deal of crossover in activities, particular roles will often focus on one of three areas. These are 'Connectivity' roles that have a focus on the deployment of the physical connectivity infrastructure to all residents and businesses, 'Business Support' roles that focus on the needs of businesses, which may include connectivity but also cover digital utilisation, growth, and other related support areas. Finally, there are roles that are programme wide in nature, this support both connectivity and business but also often support the broader activities of the partnership and its programmes. In general, the current staffing roles will fall broadly into the following groups:

The four senior roles as part of the Connecting Cheshire team would each become a named Digital Champion for one of the four local authorities. These roles in the first instance will be used to map activities across the patch on digital inclusion and then start to develop local area plans for each local authority area, identifying gaps and opportunities for future intervention.

This process will focus on digital as a whole spectrum including infrastructure, demand stimulation, digital inclusion and more to be defined.

Each representative for the partner authority will act as a named point of contact and lead to enable integration from each partner directly into the team, creating a transparent and open working environment for all partnering authorities' contributions to be seen, heard and actioned.

Additional/External Support

In addition to the roles dedicated to Digital there are additional duties and functions that are required, but not at the level that would require a full time or dedicated individual to undertake. Areas such as Financial and Legal Support will be required and if significant time allocations are required then internal 'cross charging' may be required.

Intelligence

To address issues of digital connectivity it is essential to understand and identify where and what the extent of the problems are. This requires ongoing data collection and analysis to underpin all mapping and planning activities.

The programme works with address level data and has carried out analysis to create dataset of all premises in the region. This will enable connectivity data to be overlaid seamlessly and allow detailed planning and analysis down to individual premise level. The programme will continue to develop the master dataset for the region.

Connectivity data (download and upload speeds) collection is an ongoing requirement. Data held by Connecting Cheshire requires renewal as it was collected over two years ago so is outdated with a risk of misdirecting activity to areas that may not have the greatest issues. The partnership will consider and deliver on commissions to source external surveys or sources of data and integrate these into internally held datasets.

A priority area is to focus on poor served areas and/or market failure. The vision identifies areas with sub 30Mbps speeds. Part of this workstream is to identify premises that are below 30Mbps which will support investment decisions such as the Top Up voucher scheme.

5. Communication & Engagement

The programme will continue to deliver on communication and engagement activities, and this will remain a priority to ensure external relations are active, positive, and viewed as being beneficial.

Business Engagement

The delivery team will openly engage with businesses across Cheshire and Warrington to support them with their digital transformation, providing direct access and assistance in addition to signposting to relevant information or partner services where required.

Communication and engagement methods will be delivered both digitally and virtually as part of the business engagement, from facilitating and attending networking opportunities, providing an inbound service via email and through the attendance of virtual and psychical meetings to ensure the businesses broadband/support needs are delivered on.

Residential Engagement

The team will be open and accessible for individual residential or community support to provide information or solutions. This will typically be achieved via the responses to email enquiries, attending meetings or community briefings or by utilising other public platforms available.

At the community level the team will work with communities where solutions are being installed or opportunities/ problems arise to seek and encourage the adoption of community champions to work with the Connecting Cheshire team.

Stakeholder Engagement

The programme will continue to work with many stakeholders such as other Local Authorities, Local Councillors, Members of Parliament, Parish Councils and representatives from Cheshire and Warrington LEP - all of which have a level of influence or involvement in supporting the delivery of the Digital Investment Plan. Engagement will also continue with Government bodies, in particular with those heavily involved in Digital or those who could provide external funding support such as BDUK and DLUHC.

The partners and the project team will continue and strengthen stakeholder engagement and build on the current relationships which have been developed to support the delivery of the Digital Investment Plan. Stakeholder briefings will remain available upon request or where necessary need is required. However, pro-active forward coming communications such as quarterly newsletters will ensure stakeholders remain briefed on the project throughout its entirety. In addition, all partners will be informed of the status, issues and risks during the regular Connecting Cheshire Partnership meeting.

Access to officers, intelligence, and opportunities to meet will remain the offer to stakeholders if it directly supports or influences the Digital Investment Plan and supports the success of it.

There are a number of network operators investing in connectivity networks in the Cheshire area. It is important to engage with these providers to understand where they plan to build and also where they can make changes to existing infrastructure to increase the number of premises that a network can connect.

The project team will seek to further establish and maintain good relations and communications with operators and support deployment by unblocking issues where possible. This could not only attract further investment but will also provide valuable data on the latest deployment activities and planned build in the region.

Demand Stimulation

Demand Stimulation is the method of which demand is stimulated in areas of installation or investment to ensure services and offerings are subscribed too. Historically, Connecting Cheshire has always gained positive take up of services due to the demand stimulation work carried out, resulting in Gainshare funding mechanisms allowing money back into the partnership.

In areas where Connecting Cheshire are rolling out fibre broadband, demand stimulation will be a key focus to ensure residents and businesses take up the service. In relation to business support, demand stimulation will be utilised to support the level of interest from businesses into the programme, creating a pool of leads available for the project.

Demand stimulation activities will be delivered through a combination of traditional print and online marketing, utilising social media platforms to gain greater visibility on a consistent level. Whilst working with a procured design agency to ensure adequate marketing materials are commissioned and accessible to the project.

6. Communications Approach

Building on the investment to date in brand, artwork and web/online assets, the public facing brand for the delivery of the Digital Investment Plan will remain as 'Digital Cheshire' utilising and building on this brand's digital platforms to expand the level of offering as new projects arise.

Digital Cheshire brand is recognised publicly in relation to the Airband contractual delivery and voucher/ top up schemes available, therefore we will continue to build on this.

The Connecting Cheshire brand will remain as the strategic partnership between the four local authorities and represents the collective council's vision and objectives. This brand can also be used as a lead in relation to historic BT contracts.

Digital Cheshire will utilise the Connecting Cheshire brand through affiliation due to its legacy and impact in the region to date.

7. Governance & Management

Alongside the introduction of this new Digital Investment Plan there is now a need to update governance arrangement to support delivery of plans and reflect the changing nature of digital. Since 2012 the nature of the projects and activities that have either been delivered, or form part of the of Connecting Cheshire has changed considerably. Instead of one large project there are now numerous smaller projects and schemes within the likely pipeline of activities.

The breadth of the Digital agenda has also increased, what was once primarily a goal of basic superfast has now not just extended to Gigabit, but also includes other forms of connectivity such as 4G & 5G. There is also a much greater emphasis beyond connectivity to the actual utilisation of the connectivity itself.

Additionally, the model of delivery itself has changed completely, with activities undertaken within Authorities as opposed to the used of an 'arms-length' company, nominally an independent delivery agent. There is also now a much more 'hands on' delivery of services and project outputs, as opposed to the initial model of 'contracting out' and 'management via KPIs.

Historically CEC has been the lead Authority in the partnership and has also undertaken most support activities such as employment, procurement, and legal services, in addition to being the 'contracts holder'. This however has largely continued for legacy reasons and the partnership is looking to develop and enable any partner to take responsibilities and ownership of support activities which will increase flexibility and reduce bottlenecks on delivery.

The combination of all these factors require that governance needs to be reviewed, refreshed and agreed to provide an updated and fit for purpose model.

Strategic Governance Aims

The new structure will aim at a strategic level to achieve the following:

- Have a clear and agreed Terms of Reference in place

- Be the 'default' lead for Digital Projects in the region
- It should support both connectivity, infrastructure, and other forms of Digital Support to both residents and businesses
- It should be strategic, and outcome based in approach
- Be responsible for ensuring that the necessary planning, implementing and delivery of projects or activities it is leading takes place and is adequate
- Should ensure that projects or activities either don't, or have minimal possible conflicts between each other or unnecessary overlap
- While looking to align or carry out Cheshire wide projects where possible, it should not prevent and should actively support any partner from carrying out their own local project or activities
- Co-ordinate and lead in funding applications as a default
- It should be responsible for overall comms activity to residents in Digital
- It should operate to obtain the explicit and clear support from within senior level LA partners where required
- It should move away from the model as CEC as the Lead Authority as default
- It should have its own internal structure and processes that enable and support both delivery and decision making and not be subject to adverse issues impacting any member authority
- It should, as far as is possible, seek the prior mandate or approval from individual partner Authorities to be the responsible decision takers for activities and investment of the Gainshare funds in the future
- Where it still necessary to obtain approvals from a partner member, such as 'gateway checks' that may be a compliance requirement tied to funding, the board will take responsibility for ensuring these are passed and secured

Operational Governance Aims

The new structure should also operate with Connecting Cheshire team members to achieve the following operational aims

- To shift delivery from a project and ad hoc basis, to a 'business as usual' model of delivery with a planned and agreed pipeline of parallel project and scheme delivery
- To act as a point of contact and or advice to LA staff in any of the participating authorities
- To act as the lead contact for other stakeholders, suppliers etc.
- To have required levels of resources, built on permanent staff in positions with specialties
- Should be able to include, and directly fund members employed under any member Authority
- To have staff employed by any Authority able to directly assist any other Authority member and/or activity
- Although staff based, it should have the ability to directly fund specialist contractor support if required, compliantly procured under any member Authority
- Should report its activities to Stakeholders and to the Local Authority members to promote and raise profile of activities and also to flag issues
- Should seek much greater inclusion and involvement of other LA groups/functions in all member Authorities and in particular functions such as housing, highways & planning etc.
- Should be supplier/partner neutral in approach

8. Committed Partnership Projects

The partnership has several projects or activities either underway or approved for delivery, a summary of these is as follows:

Digital Cheshire Airband ERDF Funded Build (to August 2023)

The Airband ERDF funded build is the infrastructure component of the Digital Cheshire Project. It receives ERDF funding from The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC – formerly MHCLG) and will run deployment activities until 2023.

The original deployment cost was approximately £4.5 Million and under the funding terms must meet grant 'output' requirements set by DLUHC/MHCLG. In addition to targeting premises connections the focus of the outputs is delivery to defined SMEs, although it would benefit surrounding residential properties located in the sub superfast speed locations.

The roll-out had an original 'contracted' target of just over 4,100 problem locations and the deployed infrastructure is a Gigabit speed fibre solution. The project is also the last of the national projects to adhere to the BDUK "Superfast" delivery and compliance model

Due to late delivery issues, it is not expected that that target outputs will be achieved within the ERDF timeframe and therefore a significant proportion of funding will not be claimed. However, a mechanism is being put in place that will ensure those residents who were expecting delivery will be transferred to the BDUK phase of delivery.

Digital Cheshire Business Support Programme (to August 2023)

The Business support delivery is provided primarily via a series of 'demand led' themed digital masterclasses. By offering a demand led support service, businesses which have the greatest capability to reap productivity benefits are offered the expertise, advice and support required. In doing so, the opportunity to increase take-up associated with the infrastructure element of the project is enhanced.

Since April 2021 approx. 400 businesses across various sectors and throughout the Cheshire and Warrington sub-region have engaged with the Digital Cheshire project with regards to accessing Digitally focused support via a suite of meaningful masterclasses. The subject area varies from digital marketing, cloud computing, cyber security, etc and emphasises the need for innovation and competitive advantage within the region.

In addition to the masterclass detailed above, there is a sub element of 20 business participants who receive 'Intensive support' which involved a greater level of both one-to-one assistance and time. These businesses are specially selected on the basis that they are embarking on the introduction of new technologies and processes, and these have the potential for transformational change and growth.

Built on prior experience of project outcomes these intensive interventions, while more costly, are a particularly effective method of ensuring significant changes and productivity enhancements can be both introduced and importantly embedded into their day-to-day business processes.

Digital Cheshire Airband BDUK Funded Build (September 2023 to December 2025)

Under BDUK Superfast contracts there are mechanisms in place to enable additional funding to be secured during the lifetime of the project. In early 2022 BDUK provided an additional £2m of funding that could be utilised within the existing Airband contract. This essential created an additional follow BDUK phase of Airband delivery.

The funding must be fully utilised by the end of March 2025 as that is the funding window of availability and increased contracted coverage to an additional circa 2,600 premises in both Cheshire East and Cheshire West.

This extension however has been impacted by the issues and late delivery of the ERDF phase and the need to prioritise completion of ERDF areas before commencement of new areas. The deployment will still plan to deliver 2,600 targeted connections; however, a significant proportion will shift to what were ERDF areas and some areas planned for future delivery will have to be descoped. A key area of build in the CWAC area is already in the process of descoping and voucher solutions for deployment in that area are in development.

Gigabit Top-up Voucher Scheme (to December 2025)

There is a National Voucher Scheme in place for rural premises which initially provided funding of up to £1,500 for residential homes and £3,500 for businesses help to cover the costs of installing gigabit broadband – this value will from January 2023 be increased to £4,500 for both residential and business premises. Businesses or residents that are eligible for gigabit vouchers can access the scheme through a supplier registered on the scheme and as an important condition, as part of a community project rather than individually.

The Voucher Top Up Scheme is intended to address a key issue where the vouchers do not cover the full cost of a deployment. The top up enables local bodies to "Top Up" the maximum values of the individual vouchers and aggregate value available to projects.

The Connecting Cheshire Voucher top-up model is targeting support to the lowest speed areas first, those with speeds lower that 30Mbs (those above 30 but below 100Mbs will remain eligible for the national scheme). As per requirements of the overall voucher scheme, the vouchers will only be eligible to rural premises and those that are not flagged for any future commercial or other coverage plan as identified by BDUK themselves.

The Connecting Cheshire Top Values were set under the original scheme values and are up to £2,500 for homes and £3,500 for SMEs. Combined this would mean, prior to Jan 2023 an individual Cheshire premise could access:

Premises	BDUK Contribution	Cheshire top-up available	Total funding available
Residential	Up to £1,500	Up to £2,500	Up to £4,000
SMEs	Up to £3,500	Up to £3,500	Up to £7,000

Alongside the change in values BDUK have asked scheme funders to consider their local top up values in view of the announcement. As any change to our own top up levels would require

approval, we are currently maintaining them at the existing levels, this means from Jan 2023 premises could access:

Premises	BDUK Contribution	Cheshire top-up available	Total funding available
Residential	Up to £4,500	Up to £2,500	Up to £7,000
SMEs	Up to £4,500	Up to £3,500	Up to £8,000

It is the intention, given the increase in value to align both our residential and SME contributions to the same level, lowering the SME level to match the residential level at £2,500 – so either SMEs or residential would be able to access up to £7,000.

Although this would in principle enable the funds to cover more premises, this would not be expected to significantly increase coverage scope. The key reason is that this alignment would simplify both the management and messaging of the scheme.

DCMS Lot 17 Project Gigabit for Cheshire (BDUK procurement)

Project Gigabit is a £5 billion government infrastructure project and is planned as the successor to the previous Superfast model. Gigabit is a national scheme that is being deployed in phases, the Cheshire region falling into the 3rd and final phase and is designated "Lot 17". The scheme itself is intended to improve all connections to Gigabit speed and does not specifically target the lowest Sub 30 speed premises, rather any sub-Gigabit premise.

BDUK have stated they would be looking to invest over £80m into gigabit broadband in Cheshire as part of the Lot 17 procurement. BDUK will provide two levels of contract management, however, would seek the local authorities support it's delivery through other necessary means.

The Connecting Cheshire partnership's delivery staff will work with BDUK to ensure smooth delivery of project gigabit whilst facilitating local issues such as; publicity, marketing, stakeholder engagement, highway and planning assistance, in addition to accessing local data and intelligence. Therefore, the partnership needs to be prepared for this intensive level of intervention.

The Cheshire procurement phase is due to commence between April to June 2023, however preparations are already underway, and this has had an impact in terms of a 'pause' on Voucher Scheme applications. The procurement is expected to reach the award stage January to March 2024 - this mean that on the ground delivery would likely commence in the Autumn of 2024.

The number of Cheshire premises included in the tender is circa 74,300 and BDUK have stated that the available funding is £84 to 144 million.

Project Gigabit has the potential to make a substantial impact on high-speed connectivity in the area, however it is known that the procurement process has been problematic in some areas leading to delays and consolidation of some lots into larger procurements. Also, it is a concern that it does not specifically target the worse connectivity in the area.

Mobile and Connectivity Intelligence with FarrPoint (to March 2023)

A supplier named Farrpoint has been procured via CWAC to undertake a 4G Coverage and Infrastructure (Broadband) Mapping project.

FarrPoint is an established specialist supplier who have undertaken similar activities in other area using their in-house mapping capabilities to gather data and insights and also supply tools to help visualise the levels of connectivity.

The service will provide Connecting Cheshire with two related services: firstly, an online mapping portal of connectivity availability; and secondly an independent 4G coverage survey solution with associated mapping.

This will provide significant benefits to the Councils in updating our own now aging datasets and aid in the planning and also communicating the development of connectivity in the region.

Once intelligence is gathered, the team will utilise this data to facilitate market engagement, explore opportunities and where appropriate, enable resident and supplier participation.

9. Business Support Programme (to March 2026)

The current digital business support programme is scheduled to end August 2023. Following this there will be no further assistance available for SMEs within the region to access. Therefore, there is an immediate ask for a continuation of the business support programme. Over the last three projects the business support element has been consistent throughout and symbiotic in complimenting the furtherance of connectivity, enabling businesses to grow digitally and avoiding digital exclusion.

During previous programme design a particular area of market failure and barrier faced by SMEs within the Cheshire and Warrington sub-region was a supply-side shortage of digital capability amongst the business population and employee skills in this area. This ultimately prevented businesses from maximising the potential that digital technologies offer.

Whilst the current committed projects are aimed at addressing the physical infrastructure market failures, the niche of addressing skills shortages are ever more so evident now as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is key that this need can be met by continuing the business support to provide upskilling of staff to be able to effectively utilise digital technologies and is a vital complimentary component of broad investment in physical infrastructure.

Following a summative assessment of the Digital 2020/Digital+ (carried out by ERS Research & Consultancy), it was highlighted that the project compared well against national, as well as local, innovation programmes in terms of progress towards targets, overall expenditure and GVA. When comparing against the mean values across national projects, it was seen that unit cost per output achieved for Digital 2020/Digital+ are similar or below, thereby granting confidence in the efficiency of the programme. The return-on-investment figure highlighted that net additional benefits of the programme exceeded the total investment, representing effectiveness. Overall, a positive **Benefit Cost Ration (BCR) of 1.20:1** the programme represented total additional benefits which outweighed the input costs.

Under the previous Digital 2020/Digital+ project, out of the beneficiaries surveyed 95 per cent indicated that the support was effective or very effective. Similarly, 90 per cent of respondents suggested the business support was effective in responding to the needs of their business. Beneficiaries felt that the support provided had helped them achieve and gave them a greater understanding of the opportunities associated with adopting digital technologies and skills to effectively harness these opportunities.

The economic impact assessment of the Digital 2020/Digital+ project revealed that it had created over **£1.0 million net additional GVA** and **11 FTE**.

The Summative Assessment also highlighted that there is confirmed demand for the support and that the programme team's experience and knowledge were widely considered a key success factor in delivering the programme. The content of delivery activity was deemed to be appropriate; participants praised the team for informative and engaging workshops which were suitable to their skill level.

Beneficiaries surveyed agreed that Digital 2020/Digital+ has been effective in helping them to develop their understanding and ability to effectively adopt digital technologies and strategies into their businesses, ultimately supporting growth and productivity. Overwhelmingly businesses supported felt as though they had increased digital literacy and presence on digital applications which would help business growth in an ever-changing digital environment.

Positive economic outcomes will be at the heart of any support provided and it is envisaged that that a new support project will be created that target in the following outcomes:

- Improving the local economy by supporting businesses and greater commercialisation of ICT processes and digital competitiveness.
- Development and creation of high growth/tech businesses through enhanced digital knowledge resulting in the creation of new products/services and permanent jobs.
- Work with businesses to create new flexible and digitally enabled working practices that will enable them to be more agile and robust.
- Support businesses to access to new markets, business expansion opportunities and also provide a number of other beneficial outcomes.

Building on the successes and momentum of the predecessor programmes and direct feedback from project beneficiaries has informed us of the demand and need for the continuation of masterclass and intensive assistance activity, which will enable businesses to properly utilise and take advantage of digital opportunities and technologies. To date the assistance provided has been extremely well received resulting in the creation of new products/services to market, new jobs created with demand for masterclasses at times outstripping supply.

10. Alt-Tech Grants

The Alt-Tech grant is a proposal based on the successful Welsh Government Access Broadband Cymru (ABC) Grant. That can provide a connectivity solution for more isolated or problematic premises with poor connectivity and where other solutions such as Vouchers may not be viable. Support is provided in the form of a grant that covers costs up to £800 per household to be used toward one of several 'alternative' connectivity routes, these include:

- 4G solutions (Antenna & Router)
- Satellite Internet e.g Starlink
- Line of Sight/ Point to Point
- FTTP connections where Gigabit Vouchers are not applicable

It is estimated that a total of £500,000 could be used as a pilot that would allow connections for 625 properties and there would be two bands of support:

- Maximum of £800 grant towards solutions where 30Mpbs or above are achievable
- Propose that £400 be made available for those where 15Mbps is achievable and where a "step up" in connectivity speeds 2x greater than that currently available whilst maintaining a minimum of 10Mbps

11. Other Potential & Exploratory Initiatives

There are several other potential activities and or projects that the partnership will discuss, explore and consider activities or project designed to support desired initiatives, the following provides an overview of some of these, although in the fast changing digital landscape new opportunities, issues to address and development ideas will be added.

It may be proposed that some of the activities will be requested to fund through Gainshare, whereas others the delivery team will actively seek new funding to carry out the activity.

Smart towns/cities

Recently across the UK there have been numerous "smart city" projects delivered, with Local Authorities looking to improve services and create new opportunities by taking on smart technologies.

A smart town uses information and communication technology (ICT) to improve operational efficiency, share information with the public and provide a better quality of government service and citizen welfare.

The main goal of a smart city is to optimise city functions and promote economic growth while also improving the quality of life for residents by using smart technologies and data analysis. The value lies in how this technology is used rather than simply how much technology is available.

A city's smartness is determined using a set of characteristics, including:

- An infrastructure based around technology
- Environmental initiatives
- Effective and highly functional public transportation
- Confident and progressive city plans
- People able to live and work within the city, using its resources

Aside from the technology used by a smart city, there is also the need for data analysts to assess the information provided by the smart city systems so that any problems can be addressed, and improvements made.

The CCP will co-ordinate and facilitate collaborative work which aims to improve regeneration outcomes. Specifically, the work carried out by the CCP will lead on the development of a regional Smart Towns Strategy to support and inform the identification, capture management and analysis of data that will improve the planning and monitoring of physical regeneration activities and new ways of working both within and between the 4 Local Authorities that make up the CCP. With support from the LEP, CCP will aim to create a Smart Towns Strategy within a 6-month period, detailing and creating a menu of technologies available to each LA whereby, working with Council Departments, each LA will be able to choose which technologies they wish to implement within their chosen Towns/Cities.

The CCP have enough staff available to work towards a Regional Smart Town Strategy, however a post may be considered once the strategy has been created to enable an officer (Grade 9) to work solely on Smart Town Projects across the Cheshire Region. This could be funded through Gainshare or through UKSPF. UK Gov continuously make money available for such posts to increase Smart Town outputs across the UK.

The key objectives/activities needed are:

- Initiate, develop and deliver programmes/projects necessary to deliver a Regional Smart Towns Strategy and achieve the service goals, including securing appropriate resources.
- Working with Regeneration teams to monitor and evaluate funding opportunities, develop bids for relevant competitive funding calls and secure external funding to further the development and delivery of the Regional Smart Towns Strategy.
- Give specialist professional and technical advice on smart city technologies, data and social innovation and other related areas to Councillors, Council Management and officers, Team Manager and colleagues, customers, partners and members of the public.
- To be responsible for the establishment and maintenance of cross-departmental project management/ steering groups and delivery groups to oversee the implementation of funded activity in line with the need, expectations of both internal and external partners and stakeholders. This will include ensuring that funder requirements are carried through any public communications.

Next step

The immediate action for the delivery team on this specific initiative is to develop a strategy and approach which can be agreed, before seeking an active project.

Giga-hub trials

A potential activity that would build on previous work will be to support DCMS to enable more public sites to be connected with gigabit capable networks. Already there have been 18

primary schools connected via the DCMS scheme in the region. Potential activity would focus on supporting DCMS and promoting sites for inclusion in the 'GigaHubs' project to get more public sites connected.

Next step

The immediate action for the delivery team will be to develop a business case for this project based on the trial opportunity progressing in conversation, later to be presented to the partnership and Growth Directors.

4G/5G Mobile access and development

4G Mobile wireless connectivity is now an established technology, however coverage nationally is far from universal and can become 'patchy' in particularly rural locations. While a rural centric issue there are also issue in some urban areas, while the extent of these are not known there is some evidence, such as a 2019 Which survey that identified Macclesfield as one of the worst locations in the UK for both poor 4G and fixed line connectivity, that the issue is widespread.

Initiatives such as the Farrpoint Mapping project will be able to provide a better picture and indication of the extent of the problem. Once problem areas are known and understood the partnership will look to do what it can to extend 4G coverage, which may involve supporting and communicating with network providers. We are expecting the results of the FarrPoint data exercise in Jan/Feb 2023.

5G is still an emerging technology in the UK. DCMS have in the last few years run several "Testbeds and Trials" as part of its programme. The objective to harness areas where the UK has a competitive advantage such as in scientific research, engineering talent and the rich variety of technology businesses. Typical projects have sought to:

- Accelerate the deployment of 5G networks and ensure the UK can take early advantage of the applications those networks can enable.
- Maximise the productivity and efficiency benefits to the UK from 5G.
- Create new opportunities for UK businesses and encourage inward investment.

While such testbed trials may continue there has also been the move to initial deployment of the technology more widely. It is known that there are pockets of 5G coverage in the region that seems to be centred on urban areas. As a region with a high proportion of rural areas the future rollout may be challenging across Cheshire.

Connecting Cheshire would work to assist and encourage commercial coverage of 5G as a matter of course but will look to identify opportunities for further support and potential 5G projects that could be developed, particularly if these can access national funding sources.

The delivery team will also openly explore opportunities to improve mobile access to rural parts of the region. Through the engagement of commercial providers, the partnership has an opportunity to put several cases forward for additional commercial mobile build whilst proactively exploring funding opportunities or 5G network trails.

Demand Stimulation

While enabling connectivity is a key driver of activity there is also the important component of ensuring widespread uptake of this new connectivity. This has two major beneficial outcomes, firstly for the individual residence or business it enables opportunities for access or growth, secondly that high levels of uptake in an area act as an incentive for further investment by operators who see high conversion to customer rates.

The Connecting Cheshire marketing and comms function can make a significant contribution to "Demand Stimulation", making both residents and local businesses not just aware of upcoming connectivity improvements, but also communicate the benefits of taking up these connections via tailored communication strategies. It can also contribute to building 'critical mass' voucher schemes – that is, ensuring enough resident wish to participate in a scheme to make it commercially viable for a supplier.

Within the proposal for the investment plan, it will include a budget for this activity from 2023-2026.

Sharing success

As part of the interventions which take place from the Connecting Cheshire Partnership a series of case studies and success stories will be captured. In addition of capturing positive stories, we want to encourage residents or businesses to act as 'Digital Champions' for their community.

This process enables the delivery team to engage with influencers and ambassadors of the project in individual communities to help problem solve, signpost and share a piece of communication to a wider audience. Whilst recognising the important role they play in supporting the delivery of our schemes.

The case studies and digital champions will derive from the following interventions:

- Voucher scheme community leads
- Local volunteers assisting with digital inclusion
- Business support programme
- Connected residents via Airband contract
- Parish/ Town council broadband lead

12. Further Opportunities & Recommendations – to be explored further

Alongside both committed and exploratory initiatives there are other digital issue areas that the partnership is aware of, but have not received specific attention or interventions from the partnership (although individual partners may have some support in place for their local areas).

Specific issues have been raised and would require the Connecting Cheshire Partnership to investigate further prior to identifying any potential intervention:

Digital Inclusion & NHS Support

Digital Inclusion is about ensuring that people and organisations have the right access, ability, and motivation to trust and use the internet and other digital services in order to take full advantage of the benefits that being online can bring. Digital Exclusion is the converse of Digital Inclusion and is the term given to those that cannot, or are not, accessing digital services that is having a detrimental impact.

The Connecting Cheshire Partnership recognises that Digital Inclusion impacts both residents and businesses and organisations and will work towards ensuring there are equal opportunities in accessing the benefits of digital technology. This will help to support and develop digital skills and opportunities for residents and businesses providing a positive impact for the Local Economy. The Good things foundation have calculated that there is a £9.48 return on every £1 invested in Digital Inclusion activities.

Through the Digital Investment Plan the Connecting Cheshire Partnership will look to support the Digital Inclusion Agenda through:

- Improving Connectivity in Rural areas through the continued delivery of committed funded projects including Digital Cheshire, Project Gigabit and Alt Tech Grants. For businesses and residents accessing high speed broadband is essential in improving productivity, digital skills and increasing growth and opportunities for all.

- Utilise the intelligence from the FarrPoint procurement exercise to measure and assess the impacted areas of lack of mobile coverage (4G/5G) across the region. This will look to improve mobile access and WIFI in rural areas allowing residents and businesses to access connections. NFU survey results from 2021 highlight that 38% have the broadband speeds needed, 30% have access speeds of less than 2mbps and 24% have super-fast broadband speeds but reported prohibitive costs. [i]

- Delivering a Business Support Programme to businesses aimed at increasing the usage, uptake and realising the significant economic benefits that new Digital processes and opportunities can create. This will look to build on the success of the previous 5 years which has engaged circa 400 businesses. There is a need to offer support and Digital skills initiatives to farmers and rural business owners as many do not have the knowledge to make best use of increasing speeds and new technologies, the skills gaps leave huge areas of opportunity for productivity increases as highlighted by the NFU.

- Collaborating with Stakeholders and sub regional Digital Inclusion groups/initiatives and communicating relating to Digital Inclusion. Utilising the legacy branding of the Connecting Cheshire Partnership to widen reach and audience assisting with take up inclusion programmes across LEP area.

- Develop an ecosystem framework of support in the region and agree a common framework to measure the impact that Digital Support has on residents, communities, and organisations.

The Connecting Cheshire Partnership will strengthen its working relationships with NHS and care requirements by implementing and supporting solutions which focus on the

furtherance of digital infrastructure including the take-up of services. A proportion of budget can be allocated to delivering a meaningful intervention, for example facilitation of online classes to enable more people to use NHS online services.

A pilot project will be initially developed to support with the intervention of transitioning vulnerable residents to utilising online NHS services and driving take-up. (To be defined)

By closer integrating the working relationships from digital to health/care much more can be achieved. The initial activity will be to develop an understanding of each local authority's community offering in relation to digital inclusion and up-skilling residents to feel confident in using NHS and GP applications online. Often a lot of activity is taking place with very little signposting and a central point to host the information to ensure residents who require this support can find the right information. The current Digital Cheshire website could potentially be used as an information central source.

Next steps

The delivery team have started engaging which each authority to understand what the current Digital Inclusion landscape looks like. This exercise will identify where the gaps are, in addition to seeking a way of signposting residents to pre-existing schemes local to them. In the meantime CCP will engage with NHS contacts to explore intervention areas.

Farming & Agriculture

Cheshire is a predominantly rural area with a relatively high number of farming and agricultural businesses, the physical location of these businesses often makes them particularly susceptible to connectivity issues.

Levels of access to broadband and mobile have failed to grow meaningfully in the past few years with 4G access being the same as last year at 82%, and 49% of respondents having download speeds of less than 10 Mbps

When looking at estimated download speeds the numbers are largely the same as the previous year for those getting 2 Mbps or below at 30% of respondents. The number of NFU members getting superfast broadband of 24 Mbps has increased year on year by only 4%, largely in line with the increase of take-up of superfast broadband reported by members.

While speeds are increasing slowly, the overall picture is far below national averages, 96% of the UK has superfast broadband coverage, yet only 24% of NFU members report using superfast speeds.

There are solutions that are rural-proofed including mobile broadband or fixed wireless broadband which can offer decent broadband speeds and are not as cost intensive to install as fibre. This will also help the government achieve the goal of 100% gigabit capable coverage by 2030 without rural areas being the last to be upgraded.

With many farmers and business owners not having the knowledge to make best use of increasing speeds and new technologies, the skills gaps leave huge areas of opportunity for productivity increases.

Policy Shaping

Connecting Cheshire Partnership could help to develop and support Local Authority policies that enable delivery of positive digital outcomes. Policies can be digital specific and/or linked to other areas which have direct or indirect impact on digital infrastructure deployment or addressing digital needs.

This activity could typically involve the support of policies in planning, such as ensuring fibre is deployed by building developers; highways policy for duct sharing or dig once approach; also, asset colocation policy so to enable easier deployment of digital infrastructure.

13. Proposal

Proposed financial breakdown to continue delivery

Cheshire East Council as the managing authority for the Connecting Cheshire Partnership have active projects running until March 2025 (and project closure commitment running beyond this date), additionally there are a number of project and activities that will be required in order to both meet obligations attached to Digital funds and the need to meet Authority targets and stated goals. Given this there is a need for continuation in delivery, planning and other activity relating to staffing capacity and retain experienced staff who are current on fixed term contracts until September 2023.

There are a number of existing approvals in place for many elements of the plan, however many of these are increasingly historic - and there are a number of new areas for which approval is less clear. With the significant value of the Digital investment fund and the need to refresh existing approvals, in addition the potential impact of these proposed activities and targets on the local areas, this is a significant decision that requires formalised approval.

The financial breakdown is the proposed cost and budget summary utilising the existing Gainshare funding available to the Connecting Cheshire Partnership, on this we seek a decision of acceptance to continue delivery. Note that in many instances these costs can be capitalised, and all costs relate to the Digital investment fund which requires re-investment in Digital activities or risks return to central government bodies. As such these costs, in particular staffing, should be considered separately to any wider issues or revenue concerns as funding is separate, ring fenced and would not impact on broader revenue control concerns.

	Local Bodies	ERDF	BDUK	Total
Total Funding Available by Source	£ 9,844,000	£ 2,154,597	£ 2,000,000	£ 13,998,597
Funding Allocated to Existing Interventions	£ 6,224,597	£ 2,154,597	£ 2,000,000	£ 10,379,194
Unallocated Funding	£ 3,619,403	£ -	£ -	£ 3,619,403
Confirmation Sought				
Programme Management & Delivery of the Allocated projects (Q4 25/26	£ 1,292,649	£ -	£ -	£ 1,292,649
Business Support Internal Management & Delivery (Q4 25/26)	£ 366,504	£ -	£ -	£ 366,504
Programme Overhead & Contingency (% of staff costs up to Q4 25/26)	£ 248,872	£ -	£ -	£ 248,872
Staffing Costs	£ 1,908,025	£ -	£ -	£ 1,908,025
Business Support External Delivery (Q4 25/26)	£ 300,000	£ -	£ -	£ 300,000
Demand Stimulation/Marketing (Q4 25/26)	£ 120,000	£ -	£ -	£ 120,000
Alt Tech Grant Scheme (Q4 25/26)	£ 500,000	£ -	£ -	£ 500,000
	£ 920,000	£ -	£ -	£ 920,000
Reserved for Future Requirements	£ 791,378	£ -	£ -	£ 791,378

Assumptions
Local Body gainshare composed of £7.944m (Contract 1) and £1.8m (Contract 2)
Reduction in expected C2 gainshare a prudent step to reflect current position on C2 closure and overall Openreach spend on contract
Both ERDF and BDUK funding is presented as a "use it or lose it" opportunity - if not used within the existing contract by deadline it will be lost
Digital Cheshire costs represent hypothetical maximum based on latest contractual position - if ERDF funding not fully utilised then could free up some local body allocation
Voucher Top up scheme is "up to" £4m - not all may be consumed
Programme management staffing required from Q2 23/24 to end of current delivery contracts - there will be a requirement for some staffing beyond this but have included flexibility
Assumed to be a future Business Support component to run in parallel with other schemes

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Staffing costs for Business Support assumed to run until 2025/26

Overhead on staffing costs of 15% to cover indirect costs of employment and enabler/support costs

Amount of £120K set aside to support demand stimulation (to affect take up)

Amount of £500K set aside to support creation of alt tech grants if they align with wider strategy

Requirement for staffing beyond 2026 to monitor and close down (at the appropriate time) the Digital Cheshire infrastructure contract (2030) and support Project Gigabit across Cheshire

Glossary of Terms

4G / 5G	*4th Generation & 5th Generation mobile data connectivity technologies*
BDUK	*Building Digital UK, part of DCMS and responsible for national connectivity targets and public sector delivery oversight*
CEC	*Cheshire East Borough Council*
Cheshire & Warrington LEP	*LEP covering majority of the partnership area (exc. Halton)*
Connecting Cheshire	*Name of the Local Authority partnership*
Connectivity	*Physical connection(s) enabling internet access*
Contract 1 & 2	*Contracts 1 & 2 refer to the initial Connecting Cheshire Superfast deployment projects with Openreach*
CWAC	*Cheshire West & Chester Borough Council*
DCMS	*Department of Culture, Media & Sport*
Digital	*Broad term to describe digital usage and all digital based services*
Digital Exclusion	*Term applied to any individual, group or organisation that has difficulty in accessing or utilising digital based services*
Digital Inclusion	*Ensuring that any individual, group or organisations can access or use digital based services*
DLUHC	*Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (formerly MHCLG)*
ERDF	*European Regional Development Fund (EU)*
Fibre	*Fibre optic based hi speed connection*
Gigabit	*Hi speed connections, any technology delivering speeds of 1000Mbs or higher*
Gainshare	*A contractual mechanism whereby public funding is returned if customer take up (usage) of supported deployment is above a set limit*
Halton (Council)	*Halton Borough Council*
LEP	*Local Enterprise Partnership*
MBs	*Megabytes per second, metric used to measure connectivity speeds*
Partners	*Usually referring to the Local Authority members of the Connecting Cheshire Partnership*
Sub-superfast	*Any connection speed that falls below the Superfast metric of 30MBs, this term is generally used to identify premises with the lowest speeds*
Superfast	*A connection achieving 30MBs or higher, generally superseded metric nationally but still used to class lower speeds*
Warrington (Council)	*Warrington Borough Council*
Wireless	*Any connectivity technology utilising signal-based transmission (requiring no direct cable connection)*