

Enterprise M3 Board Meeting

30 July 2020

Digital Fibre Spine - Item 8

Enterprise M3 Board are to:

AGREE: the vision for developing a fibre spine between Guildford and Basingstoke which gives effect to the proposals in the Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) work to support a step change in digital connectivity in the EM3 area

NOTE: that further detailed work is underway on the route, business case, funding and approach to governance and procurement which will be described in a short presentation at the meeting.

1. Background

- 1.1 The analytical work undertaken for the LIS demonstrated the need for a step change to address poor mobile and broadband connectivity in parts of the area; meet business needs for speed and capacity in transferring data which is crucial for some frontier sectors; and open up opportunities for implementing smart systems and for transforming public services. The need for greatly enhanced digital infrastructure has been further demonstrated during the current Covid-19 crisis.
- 1.2 The game changer is to have fibre in the ground which offers gigabit capable and resilient connectivity. Accordingly, the LIS work included an initial route for a fibre spine from the Guildford 5G Innovation Centre to the Basingstoke Enterprise Zone via Farnham, Aldershot, Farnborough and Camberley which was developed with and mapped by OS and made the greatest possible use of soft dig (e.g. using verges not roads) to keep costs down.
- 1.3 In May the LEP commissioned the detailed work needed for a business case for this route with the intention that it would be ready in the autumn. However, the work has been significantly accelerated to take advantage of the opportunity for using Getting Building Fund to meet some of the costs. PMG has now approved the proposal that £4.5 million of EM3's GBF allocation should go towards the fibre spine.

2. Vision

2.1 The initial fibre spine will:

- enable access to fibre and gigabit capable services for many more business and domestic customers helping to close the digital divide across the area;
- encourage commercial operators to build digital infrastructure deeper in the area to improve resilience, stimulate economic growth and further close the digital divide;
- connect public service buildings including hospitals to support upgrading of public service networks, digitisation of public services and the development of smart systems;
- be wholesale and open access.

3. Next Steps

- 3.1 The presentation will provide more detail on the development of the business case, the finalisation of the route, the opportunities arising from an active layer providing connectivity, the options for completing the funding package for the full programme, the options for procurement and the decisions that will be needed from local authorities and the LEP.
- 3.2 In terms of timetable, it is a requirement of GBF funding that funds are used by the end of 2021. On that basis the main stages of the work include:
- completing the detailed mapping of the route so that it maximises the benefit to councils, businesses and potential operators
 - completing the detailed business plan which sets out the scale of the opportunities for the area and the full funding package (in August)
 - establishing a partnership across the relevant local authorities to make decisions about the way in which the infrastructure is to be procured (likely to be via a JV or SPV) and operated including an active layer offering connectivity to locations along the route
 - contracting the civil engineering expertise to lay the fibre and the associated kit (could begin in 2020 subject to procurement and planning).
 - putting in place the active layer for the provision of connectivity services (during 2021)
 - having the network in place by end 2021.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 This is an ambitious timetable. It is, however, perfectly capable of being achieved if decisions are made in a timely way and the engineering capacity is available (on which some quiet soft market testing has begun).
- 4.2 There is a clear opportunity to further extend the spine in the future to connect other locations and to build spurs off the original route.

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