

Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone

Annual Progress Report

2024/25





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Foreword from our Chair

As Chair of the Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ), I am delighted to introduce our 2024/25 Annual Progress Report. This past year has once again demonstrated the pace at which the digital landscape continues to evolve—bringing with it both exciting opportunities and complex challenges. From artificial intelligence to digital infrastructure, the technologies shaping our world are increasingly embedded in the everyday lives of our residents and businesses.

For a small organisation like the DIZ, keeping pace with this rapid change is no small feat. Our capacity is limited, yet the scope of digital developments is vast. This reality makes our role as a convenor and connector more vital than ever. We must continue to share knowledge, insights and understanding with our partners to ensure that we are collectively informed and agile in our response to emerging trends.

This report reflects the collaborative spirit that defines the DIZ. It highlights the importance of working together to prioritise our focus—ensuring that our interventions are not only timely but also impactful. By aligning our efforts, we can better support inclusive growth, digital resilience, and innovation across Essex and Hertfordshire.

I am proud of the progress we continue to make and grateful to all our partners for their continued commitment. As we look ahead, I encourage us all to remain curious, collaborative, and courageous in our pursuit of digital excellence. Together, we can ensure that the DIZ remains a beacon of innovation and a catalyst for meaningful change.

Cllr Alan Lion, Epping Forest District Council
Chair, Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ)



An introduction by Mike Warr, DIZ Programme Manager + Acting Director

The digital landscape is no longer a separate sphere—it is all-encompassing. For the DIZ, our partner organisations, and the communities we serve, digital innovation now touches every aspect of daily life. From how residents access services to how businesses operate and grow, the digital thread runs through it all. This brings with it a powerful opportunity—but also a responsibility—to stay informed, agile, and collaborative in how we respond to the ever-evolving digital world.

Staying across the breadth of emerging opportunities and challenges is no small task. It requires not only awareness but also the ability to anticipate what's coming next. That's why the DIZ has continued to invest in innovative horizon-scanning and knowledge-sharing practices. Our weekly newsletter remains a cornerstone of this effort, and throughout the year we have continued to explore ways to increase its relevance and

reach. Likewise, our regular knowledge-sharing board sessions have been refreshed to ensure they provide real value to our partners—offering a space to explore, question, and learn together – and these sessions are set for further innovation and enhancement to ensure they can support best practice across as wide a public sector audience as possible.

But knowledge alone is not enough. To make a meaningful impact, we must work together to prioritise our focus. The DIZ cannot—and should not—try to do everything. Instead, we need to ensure that our collective efforts are targeted where they can deliver the greatest value for our partners and the most benefit for the DIZ geography.

We are also mindful of the wider context in which we operate. Local government is undergoing significant

change, and while all of the details may take time to unfold, we can begin now to explore how the DIZ can play an active role in preparing our places for the future of digital innovation. This means being proactive, adaptable, and above all, collaborative.

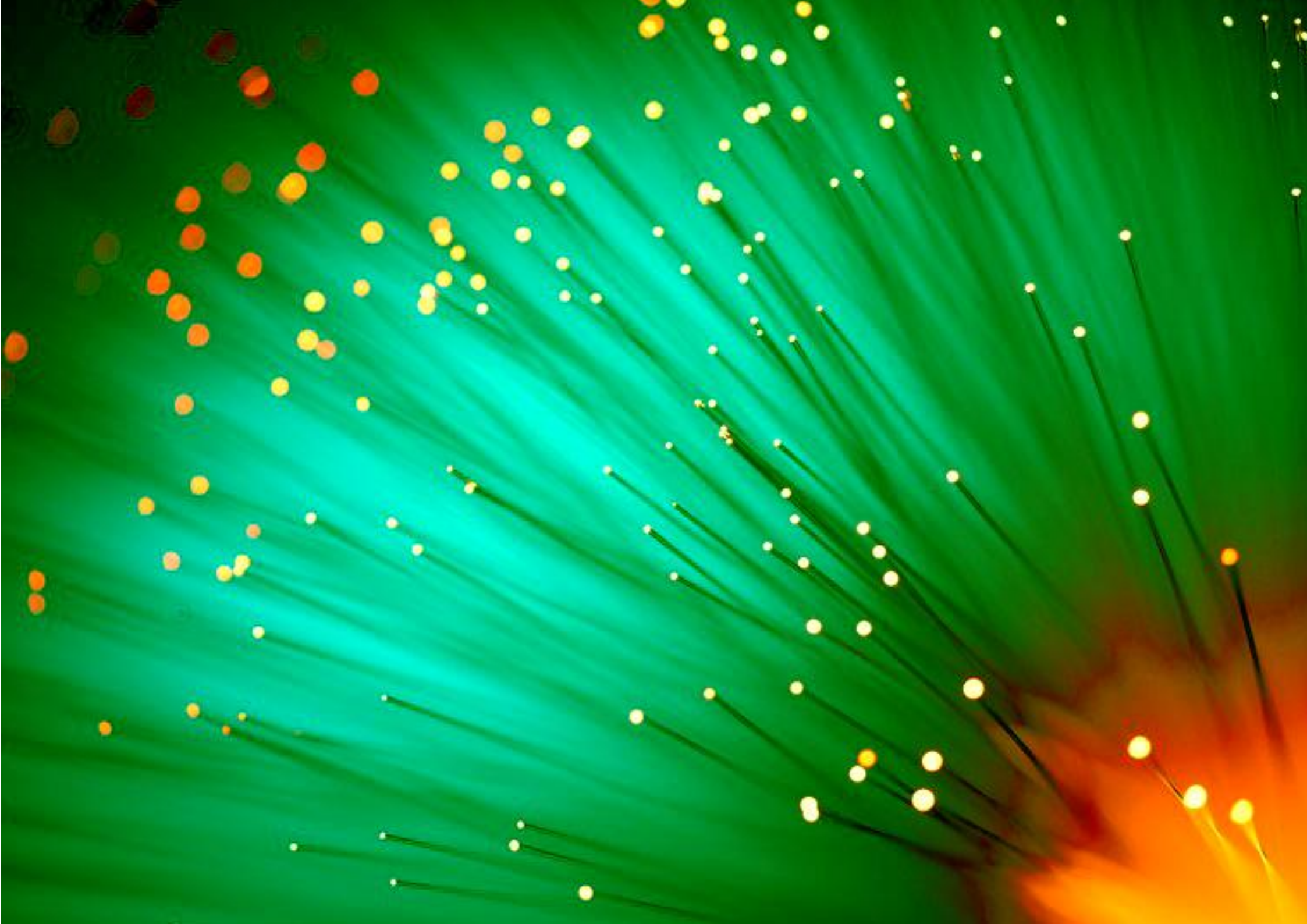
This year has brought its share of real-world challenges. Cyber-security remains a pressing concern, and we experienced this first-hand with the impact on our own website. Yet, we've also seen great progress. Our understanding of the mobile connectivity across the region has improved, supported by increased proactive engagement with industry stakeholders, and our work has also been recognised again through our short-listing for a highly valued public sector smart working award—an encouraging sign that our unique journey is continuing to be noticed and appreciated.

None of this would be possible without the support of our funding partners. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Epping Forest District Council, Harlow Council, Uttlesford District Council, Essex County Council, Hertfordshire County Council, Broxbourne Borough Council and East Herts District Council. The continued commitment of our partners enables us to shape and deliver a work programme that brings real value to both place and partners.

As we look ahead, I would like to think that by working together, we can continue to navigate the digital landscape with purpose and impact—ensuring that the DIZ remains a catalyst for innovation and a champion for inclusive, future-ready communities.

Mike Warr

DIZ Programme Manager and Acting Director





Prioritisation + Strategic Focus

In a digital environment that is constantly evolving, the ability to prioritise effectively is essential. For the DIZ, this past year has been defined by a renewed focus on identifying where our limited capacity can be most effectively deployed to deliver meaningful, place-based impact. Two major exercises—the work of the Digital Sustainability Special Interest Group (SIG) and the DIZ Executive Board’s Strategic Review— played a central role in shaping our direction and refining our focus for the months and years ahead.

Digital Sustainability SIG: Building a Foundation for Impact

In March 2024, the Digital Sustainability SIG convened with the ambition of exploring how digital innovation can support sustainability goals across the DIZ geography. The session brought together a diverse

group of partners and stakeholders, generating a rich and expansive baseline of potential projects, workstreams, and initiatives. From behaviour change campaigns to technical interventions, the ideas reflected the breadth of opportunity—and the challenge of focus.

While some initial prioritisation took place during the workshop, it quickly became clear that further work was needed to make sense of the outputs and shape them into a viable work programme. With the SIG operating on the goodwill and availability of partners, and the DIZ Programme Manager responsible for driving delivery, the group had to be pragmatic. The result was a structured effort to classify and scope the ideas, identifying those that could realistically be delivered within the available capacity.

This process led to the development of a rich database

of sustainability-related project ideas—an invaluable resource for future planning and funding bids. More immediately, the SIG identified two priority areas for focused development:

Reducing Email Traffic: A behaviour change initiative aimed at reducing the volume of internal and external email traffic within a partner organisation. The goal is to lower the carbon footprint associated with digital communication and storage, while also improving productivity and digital hygiene.

Website Sustainability: Building on earlier work, this project aims to assess and improve the sustainability of partner websites, with the potential to influence broader organisational practices around digital content and infrastructure.

Progress on these workstreams has been steady, though not without its challenges. Competing priorities and limited capacity have slowed momentum, but the commitment to these areas remains strong. The SIG's work has laid a solid foundation, and the focus on delivering smaller, targeted projects is a strategic choice—one that can demonstrate impact and build the case for further investment and engagement. Importantly, the SIG's efforts have reinforced the DIZ's commitment to keeping the climate impact of digital innovation at the forefront of our agenda.

DIZ Executive Board Strategic Review: Charting a Shared Course

In September 2024, the DIZ Executive Board came together for a creative and forward-looking strategic review session. Recognising the need to align our efforts with the evolving needs of our partners and the communities we serve, the session was designed to be

both reflective and aspirational. Using a “sailboat exercise” as a facilitation tool, partners were invited to consider the forces that propel us forward and the goals toward which we are working as well as the factors that hold us back, and the challenges on the horizon that we must navigate through.

From this session, core Priority Themes emerged that will guide DIZ's strategic focus over the next 18 months:

Digital for Place

This theme focuses on how digital tools and infrastructure can enhance the quality of life for residents, improve service delivery, and support local priorities.

The priority project for this theme is mapping and improving digital infrastructure across the DIZ, focused on the availability and quality of mobile coverage.

Emerging Digital Opportunities and Funding Opportunities

With the pace of digital change accelerating, this theme is about staying ahead of the curve—identifying new technologies, trends, and funding streams that can be leveraged for local benefit.

Priority projects include establishing a horizon-scanning function to identify and assess emerging technologies and developing a pipeline of project concepts ready for funding opportunities as they arise.

Knowledge Uplift and Sharing of Best Practice

Building on the DIZ's established role as a hub for knowledge exchange, this theme focuses on raising awareness, building capacity, and sharing what works across the partnership.

Priority projects include enhancing the reach and format of the DIZ newsletter and knowledge-sharing sessions.

Development of a Structured Approach to DIZ Projects

As the DIZ matures, there is a growing need for a more structured approach to project development and delivery. This theme ensures that our work is focused, measurable, and aligned with partner priorities.

Additional and Emerging Themes

Beyond the core themes, the strategic review also surfaced a number of additional thematic areas that generated valuable project ideas. These included Data; Business; Inclusion; Audience; Networking; and, Shared Services. While these themes may not be the immediate focus of the current work programme, they represent a rich source of ideas that could be explored in future phases of DIZ activity. The database of project concepts developed through this process will serve as a valuable resource for future planning and funding bids.

Addressing Challenges and Threats

Alongside the identification of opportunities, the strategic review also surfaced a number of priority challenges that should also be addressed so that the DIZ continues delivering value. Chief among these were securing the future funding of the DIZ and confirming the longer-term partner commitment and buy-in to the partnership. Work to address these challenges has been prioritised alongside the development of the Priority Theme workstreams, including targeted engagement with senior stakeholders, the development of compelling narratives and evidence of impact, and the exploration of new partnership and funding models.

(c) ["Ageing Better partnered with Independent Age via Centre for Ageing Better"](#)



Collaboration + Recognition

From its inception, the DIZ has placed collaboration at the very heart of everything it does. The DIZ was founded on the principle that digital innovation is most effective when it is co-created - shaped by the insights, needs, and ambitions of a diverse network of partners. Over the years, this spirit of collaboration has enabled the DIZ to deliver meaningful, place-based impact across Essex and Hertfordshire. In 2024/25, that commitment to working together remained as strong as ever, underpinning a range of initiatives and helping to raise the profile of the DIZ both regionally and nationally.

Working Together for Place-Based Impact

One of the most significant collaborative initiatives of the year was the DIZ's active **participation in a Digital Essex Workshop** held in early 2025. This event brought together colleagues from across the public sector in

Essex to share experiences of digital innovation, identify place-based challenges and aspirations, and explore how digitalisation might help address them. The workshop aligned directly with two of the DIZ's strategic priorities—Digital for Place and Emerging Digital Opportunities—and provided a valuable forum for knowledge exchange and joint planning. The ideas and insights generated have helped shape a pipeline of potential projects that are now being developed in readiness for future funding opportunities.

Another powerful example of collaboration in action has been the **delivery of communal fibre connectivity** to a sheltered housing scheme for elderly residents in Epping Forest. This project, delivered in partnership with Digital Essex, Epping Forest District Council, a local community champion, voluntary and community sector partners and infrastructure providers, is a testament to what can be achieved when organisations come together with a shared purpose. Many of the residents have little or no experience of the digital world, and communal fibre is a critical first step in helping them access the benefits of digital connectivity - from staying in touch with loved ones to accessing health and wellbeing services online. Having navigated the varied challenges of installation, the project team is now focused on designing and delivering a programme of digital inclusion training sessions tailored to the needs of the residents. This next phase will be crucial in ensuring that the infrastructure investment translates into meaningful outcomes for the community.

The DIZ has also worked with partners to procure a **mobile connectivity mapping platform**. Conducting detailed desktop research and supplier engagement on behalf of partners and delivering a detailed options

appraisal report to the DIZ Executive Board, a collective decision was made to procure a crowdsourced platform that best met current partner needs but which could also be used to help develop the business case for more detailed future connectivity surveys. This tool will enable us to better understand the coverage of mobile connectivity across the DIZ area, identify 'not spots' and areas of concern, and visualise patterns that can inform future planning. The data generated will support proactive engagement with infrastructure providers, help shape community conversations on connectivity, and provide evidence to inform the planning process for future infrastructure deployment. This data-led approach reflects the DIZ's commitment to use insight to drive action and ensure investment in digital infrastructure is targeted where it is needed most.

The DIZ also played a coordinating role in shaping a potential **digital support programme for business** in collaboration with Enterprise Nation. This initiative aimed to explore how digital technologies can be used to enhance the design and delivery of support for small businesses across the DIZ geography - first, to test new digital tools and platforms in the provision of business support; and second, to deliver relevant, accessible support to small businesses navigating the challenges of digital transformation.

Recognition and Visibility

This has also been a year in which the DIZ has continued to gain wider recognition for its efforts. In 2024, the DIZ was **shortlisted in the 'Small Scale, Big Impact' category of the [Smarter Working Live \(SWL\) Awards](#)**. These awards, delivered by GovNews in conjunction with the Government Property Agency (GPA), celebrate organisations that demonstrate maturity in smarter

"I hope that, like me, you view your inclusion on this shortlist as evidence that you are leading the way in creating a smarter, more modernised public sector in the UK. I am delighted that your work is being recognised and I am certain that your innovation and resilience will inspire others."

In March 2025, the DIZ Programme Manager and Acting Director was invited by Hertfordshire Futures to **participate in a live online webinar** titled [“Are We AI Ready?”](#). This session was the final instalment in a series of online policy debate events exploring key issues affecting economic growth across the region. The webinar brought together voices from the public sector, private industry, and academia to explore the risks and opportunities associated with artificial intelligence. Topics included the ethical implications of AI adoption, the potential for AI to drive innovation in public services, and the importance of addressing digital exclusion to ensure equitable access to emerging technologies. The DIZ’s contribution to this discussion highlighted the importance of place-based readiness and the role of local partnerships in preparing communities for the digital future. Participation in this high-profile event not only raised the visibility of the DIZ but also reinforced its position as a thought leader in the regional digital innovation ecosystem.

Hertfordshire Futures Debates

Are We AI Ready?

5 March | 10.00 - 11.00

Chaired by Matt Deegan,
radio and podcast host



Jyoti Choudrie,
Professor of
Information Systems,
University of
Hertfordshire



Stewart Vincent,
Director,
Board Member,
Hertfordshire Futures



Ed Thomas,
Research Director,
Global Data Plc



Julia McNally,
Director,
Wellstat Limited



Mike Warr,
Programme Manager +
Acting Director,
Digital Innovation
Zone



Neil Hayes,
CEO,
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Knowledge Sharing + Horizon-Scanning

The DIZ has always placed knowledge sharing at the core of its mission. From its earliest days, the DIZ has been committed to helping partners, stakeholders, and communities understand and navigate the ever-evolving digital landscape. This year, that commitment has not only continued—it has flourished.

Our reputation for delivering engaging, insightful, and forward-thinking knowledge uplift sessions has grown steadily, and 2024/25 has seen some of our most ambitious and impactful work to date. These sessions have become a vital part of the DIZ's offer, showcasing innovative initiatives, exploring emerging technologies, and sharing best practice from across the public sector. They are designed to contribute to the digital readiness of our place, our partners, and our people—and this year, they have done just that.

A Diverse and Dynamic Programme

The range of topics covered in our knowledge uplift sessions has been as broad and relevant as ever. We've tackled some of the most pressing and exciting themes in digital innovation, always with a focus on practical application and local relevance.

Digital inclusion has remained a key priority. We explored the Minimum Digital Living Standard project, which sets out what people need to be digitally included in today's society, and Essex County Council's Digital Help Finder Tool, which helps residents access support and resources tailored to their digital needs. These sessions sparked important conversations about equity, access, and the role of local authorities in bridging the digital divide.

Data and insight also featured prominently. Presentations from Essex County Council's Centre for Data Analytics and the Arts Council England's Culture & Place Data Explorer demonstrated how data can be used to inform decision-making, support cultural investment, and shape place-based strategies. These sessions highlighted the power of data to drive smarter, more responsive public services.

We also looked at the ways that partners are deploying technology to support the lives of some of our most vulnerable residents through Tech Enabled care and how digital twins might be deployed to enable sustainable management of the buildings we occupy. These discussions opened up new possibilities for how local authorities can use technology to better understand and serve their communities.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, artificial intelligence (AI) was a recurring theme throughout the year. We hosted

sessions on the use of AI in council service delivery, ethically rooted applications of AI, and the potential for AI to support business development and growth. These sessions helped demystify AI, explore its practical uses, and consider the ethical and social implications of its adoption.

Engagement and Reach

In total, we hosted 11 guest presentations over the course of the year, with more than 140 unique attendees representing 46 different organisations. This level of engagement reflects the value our partners place on these sessions and the relevance of the topics we explore. The sessions have become a trusted space for learning, discussion, and collaboration—bringing together voices from across local government, the public sector, academia, and industry.

Recognising the growing demand for these sessions and the need to extend their reach, we launched a new phase of our knowledge uplift programme in May 2025: the DIZ Digital Innovation Forum. This relaunch marked a shift towards a more outward-facing approach, aimed at increasing the visibility of the DIZ and engaging a wider audience across the local authority, public sector, and community and voluntary sectors.

The early sessions of the Forum have already exceeded expectations. Guest presentations from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and Microsoft attracted record attendance figures, with participants joining from across the region and beyond. These sessions have helped raise the profile of the DIZ, showcase our work to new audiences, and strengthen our position as a regional leader in digital innovation.

Flexibility and Accessibility

This year also marked a significant step forward in making our sessions more accessible. For the first time, we delivered a substantial number of session reruns—responding to partner feedback and recognising that not everyone can attend live events. Over 80 people attended rerun sessions across the year, with one session, “The Myth of Silver Bullets”, attracting over 50 attendees on its own. This session acknowledged the genuinely exciting developments taking place today in technology, including artificial intelligence, but made the point that it is vitally important to also examine the foundations on which these technologies will be built in order to be successfully deployed. These reruns have allowed us to extend the impact of our sessions; ensure that more people can benefit from the insights shared; and, build a more inclusive and flexible knowledge-sharing offer.

Horizon-Scanning and Insight

Complementing our live sessions, the DIZ’s weekly horizon-scanning newsletter has continued to provide a valuable digest of digital developments. This newsletter curates articles, tools, and events from across the digital landscape, helping partners stay informed and inspired. In 2024 alone, we shared over 750 curated links, covering everything from emerging technologies and policy updates to funding opportunities and case studies.

The newsletter now reaches more than 50 organisations, with an open rate that consistently exceeds industry benchmarks. It has become a trusted source of insight for partners across the DIZ geography and beyond—supporting strategic planning, sparking new ideas, and helping teams stay ahead of the curve.

(Made Smarter) Made Smarter Adoption Programme - Boosting UK manufacturing growth across the East Of England: The Made Smarter Adoption programme connects manufacturers with digital tools, innovations, and skills that can help them grow.

Week ending Friday 1st August (N.B. Previous weeks' links are retained below)

Digital Inclusion
(Digital Poverty Alliance) The research...



Hello All,

Please see below this week's links of interest. Please do share with any contacts or colleagues that may be interested.

Week ending Friday 8th August (N.B. Previous weeks' links are retained below).

Digital Inclusion

(Sports England) Digital inclusion and physical activity: Sports England worked with Google Foundation to understand the connection between digital inclusion and participation in sport and their objective was to see what they can do to support digital inclusion across the sector, particularly those who face the most barriers to getting active.

(Total Telecom) VMO2 taps Age UK to help elderly customers manage 3G switch and Age UK are working together to provide additional support to the small number of older people who will need to upgrade their handsets to continue using mobile data once 3G is switched off.

Online Safety

(DSIT) Keeping children safe online: changes to the Online Safety Act explained experience the internet has fundamentally changed, as new laws under the Online Safety Act to protect under-18s from harmful online content they shouldn't ever be seeing.

Digital + the Public Sector

(LocalGov) 10 Ways Councils Are Using AI to Transform Public Services: As AI enhances service delivery and efficiency, AI-based technologies are gaining traction across the public sector. Councils are putting artificial intelligence to practical use.

Experts warn: AI is eroding engagement: AI is eroding genuine engagement by mirroring students to bypass genuine learning.

Looking Ahead

As the DIZ looks to the future, our commitment to preparing our place, partners, and people for the digital age remains stronger than ever. The past year has reinforced the value of collaboration, the importance of knowledge sharing, and the need to stay agile in a rapidly evolving landscape. These principles will continue to guide our work as we enter a new phase of transformation.

A key development on the horizon is the approaching Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). While change brings complexity, it also presents a unique opportunity to embed digital innovation at the heart of future service delivery. The wider public sector is increasingly recognising the value of digital approaches, and the DIZ will ensure our geography actively contributes to shaping the region's digital future. By leveraging our networks, insight, and convening power, we aim to support LGR through practical, place-based digital initiatives.

Digital innovation will be a critical enabler of LGR—supporting efficient service delivery, improving engagement, and driving better outcomes. The DIZ will continue to play a proactive role, ensuring digital readiness is built into the foundations of future governance.

Our evolving knowledge sharing and horizon-scanning activity, including the newly launched DIZ Digital Innovation Forum, will expand its reach across local

authorities, public sector bodies, and community organisations. These sessions will showcase innovation, share best practice, and foster collaboration to develop funding-ready, place-based digital projects.

Reflecting the growing focus on digital skills and digital applications across the public sector, business, industry, and government, our work programme will continue to explore several key themes:

- Mobile Connectivity and Broadband Access: Addressing infrastructure gaps and improving coverage to ensure reliable access for residents and businesses. This includes continuing our data-led approach to identifying 'not spots' and engaging proactively with infrastructure providers.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI): Supporting ethical, practical, and strategic adoption.
- Digital Skills and Inclusion: Building capacity and expertise across organisations, residents, and businesses to ensure inclusive participation in the digital economy.
- Digital Sustainability: Promoting environmentally responsible innovation.
- Data and Insight: Driving smarter decision-making and service design.

The year ahead promises transformation, opportunity, and continued collaboration. The DIZ is ready to meet the moment—bringing people together, sharing knowledge, and driving innovation for the benefit of our place and its future.

To stay in touch with our work programme and progress, follow us on [LinkedIn](#) or visit our website diz.org.uk.



Notes:

About the DIZ

While the partners of the DIZ, individually and collectively, are committed to innovate and flex an approach to deliver a better served, better connected place, our mission statement remains the same:

To be the best connected place of its type in the UK.

A place of innovation and inclusion.

A place where the benefits of digital investment are harnessed, maximised and shared across residents, commuters, businesses and borders.

For more information about the DIZ and its work programme and to explore opportunities to get involved, please get in touch:

Mike Warr, DIZ Programme Manager + Acting Director

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