

The DIZ: Making a Difference Through Digital

A story of place, partnership and digital innovation



April 2026

Foreword from the Chair

The Digital Innovation Zone existed to serve its place. It brought together organisations that shared a geography, a set of challenges and a belief that digital, when approached thoughtfully and collaboratively, could deliver real benefits for residents, businesses and public services.

Over recent years, digital has become integral to how we plan, communicate and deliver. Expectations have risen, technologies have evolved, and the pace of change has continued to accelerate. In that context, the DIZ has provided something of lasting value: a forum where partners can come together to make sense of that change, to learn from one another, and to consider how digital investment and innovation can be shaped around local need rather than organisational boundaries.

What stands out in reflecting on the work captured in this report is the consistency of the partnership's approach. Progress has been built through collaboration rather than competition, and through shared understanding rather than isolated decision-making. The DIZ has not sought to own outcomes, but to enable them - creating the conditions in which partners can align effort, share insight and respond with confidence to emerging challenges.

The strength of this approach lay in its focus on place. By working across sectors and administrative boundaries, with both districts and counties, the DIZ has helped ensure that digital

activity reflects the realities of the communities we serve. That includes recognising the importance of strong infrastructure, inclusive access, and the skills and confidence needed to make the most of digital opportunity and ensure that no-one is left behind.

This report tells a story of partnership in action. It reflects the commitment of many organisations and individuals who have contributed time, expertise and leadership. As Chair, I would like to thank all those involved and acknowledge the collective effort of the elected members and officers that have shaped the DIZ's work to date. The principles that underpin this collaboration - openness, trust and a shared sense of purpose - remain essential as digital continues to influence the future of our place.

Councillor Alan Lion,

Councillor and Vice-Chairman, Epping Forest DC

Chair of the DIZ



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Executive Summary

This report brings together the story of the Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) and the approach it has taken to supporting digital progress across its place. Rather than focusing on any single initiative, it reflects on how partners have worked together across organisational and geographical boundaries to explore challenges, respond to opportunities and build shared understanding in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

At the heart of the DIZ is a recognition that digital issues are experienced at the level of place. Connectivity, infrastructure, inclusion, skills and sustainability do not align neatly with administrative boundaries, and effective responses depend on collaboration across local government, health, education, the voluntary and community sector and industry. The partnership has provided a practical framework through which those organisations have been able to align effort, share learning and coordinate activity around shared priorities.

A significant theme within the report is the role of digital infrastructure as an enabling foundation. The delivery of full-fibre broadband connectivity to GP surgeries across west Essex and east Hertfordshire demonstrates how coordinated, place-based working can unlock investment, improve performance and create wider benefits beyond the immediate scope of a programme. That infrastructure has supported more resilient service delivery and provided a platform for future innovation.

Building on that foundation, the DIZ has treated connectivity as an ongoing strategic concern rather than a one-off challenge. Through evidence-led analysis, engagement with industry and participation in national initiatives, the partnership has worked to understand patterns of broadband and mobile coverage, identify gaps and support more informed conversations about future investment. This work has helped ensure that connectivity is understood not simply as a technical issue, but as a core enabler for residents, businesses and public services.

The report also highlights the DIZ's sustained focus on digital inclusion. Recognising that improved connectivity alone does not guarantee access or benefit, the partnership has supported the work of specialist organisations and promoted inclusive practice across all digital activity. Place-based initiatives have demonstrated how connectivity and capability can be developed

together, reinforcing the importance of confidence, skills and support in enabling people to benefit from digital change.

Knowledge sharing has been a defining feature of the DIZ's approach. Through Advisory Boards, Smart Place Seminars, the Digital Innovation Forum and regular horizon-scanning activity, partners have been supported to stay informed, build confidence and respond collectively to an evolving digital environment. This emphasis on shared learning has strengthened relationships across the partnership and reduced duplication of effort.

Innovation and sustainability have been approached with the same pragmatic mindset. The DIZ has been willing to test new ideas, explore emerging technologies and learn from experience, while remaining mindful of proportionality, governance and environmental impact. Special Interest Groups have provided focused spaces for partners to develop and refine ideas collaboratively, bridging strategic ambition and practical delivery.

External recognition and invitations to share learning have reflected wider interest in the DIZ's place-based, cross-sector approach. Awards and speaking engagements have helped validate the partnership model and raise the profile of the place, while reinforcing confidence among partners that their collective effort is valued and relevant.

Across the piece, this report reflects an approach built on collaboration, learning and adaptability. As the local government and digital landscapes continue to evolve, the experience of the DIZ suggests that progress is most effectively achieved when organisations work together, grounded in local context and a shared commitment to place.



Introduction from the DIZ

Programme Manager + Acting Director

This report brings together the story of how the DIZ has worked, what it has delivered, and what it has enabled. It is not a catalogue of individual projects, but a reflection on an approach - one that has focused on coordination, collaboration and learning in response to a rapidly changing digital landscape.

During the period covered by the DIZ's work, digital has become embedded across almost every aspect of public life. It influences how services are designed and delivered, how organisations collaborate, and how residents and businesses interact with the public sector. For many partners, the challenge has not been whether to engage with digital, but how to do so in a way that is informed, proportionate and rooted in local priorities.

The DIZ was created to support that challenge. Its role has been to bring partners together, to share insight, and to provide space for discussion at a time when change can feel continuous and, sometimes, overwhelming. Rather than prescribing solutions, the DIZ has focused on helping partners ask better questions - about infrastructure, connectivity, inclusion, skills and sustainability - and on creating the conditions for informed decision-making.

One of the most important lessons from this work is that impact does not necessarily require scale, but it does require alignment. Operating with limited formal capacity, the DIZ has been able to support meaningful outcomes by acting as a convenor and connector. By prioritising relationships over ownership and outcomes over activity, the partnership has been able to make progress across areas that no single organisation could easily address alone.

The sections that follow reflect this way of working. They show how a focus on place and partnership has

underpinned investment in infrastructure; how infrastructure has enabled wider connectivity; and how improved connectivity has created opportunities to address inclusion and build confidence. They also demonstrate the value of knowledge sharing - both in helping partners stay informed about emerging digital issues and in building the confidence needed to respond effectively.

Looking ahead, the environment in which local government operates will continue to evolve. New technologies, policy changes and funding opportunities will emerge, often at pace. The challenge will be less about predicting what comes next, and more about being prepared to assess and respond to it collectively.

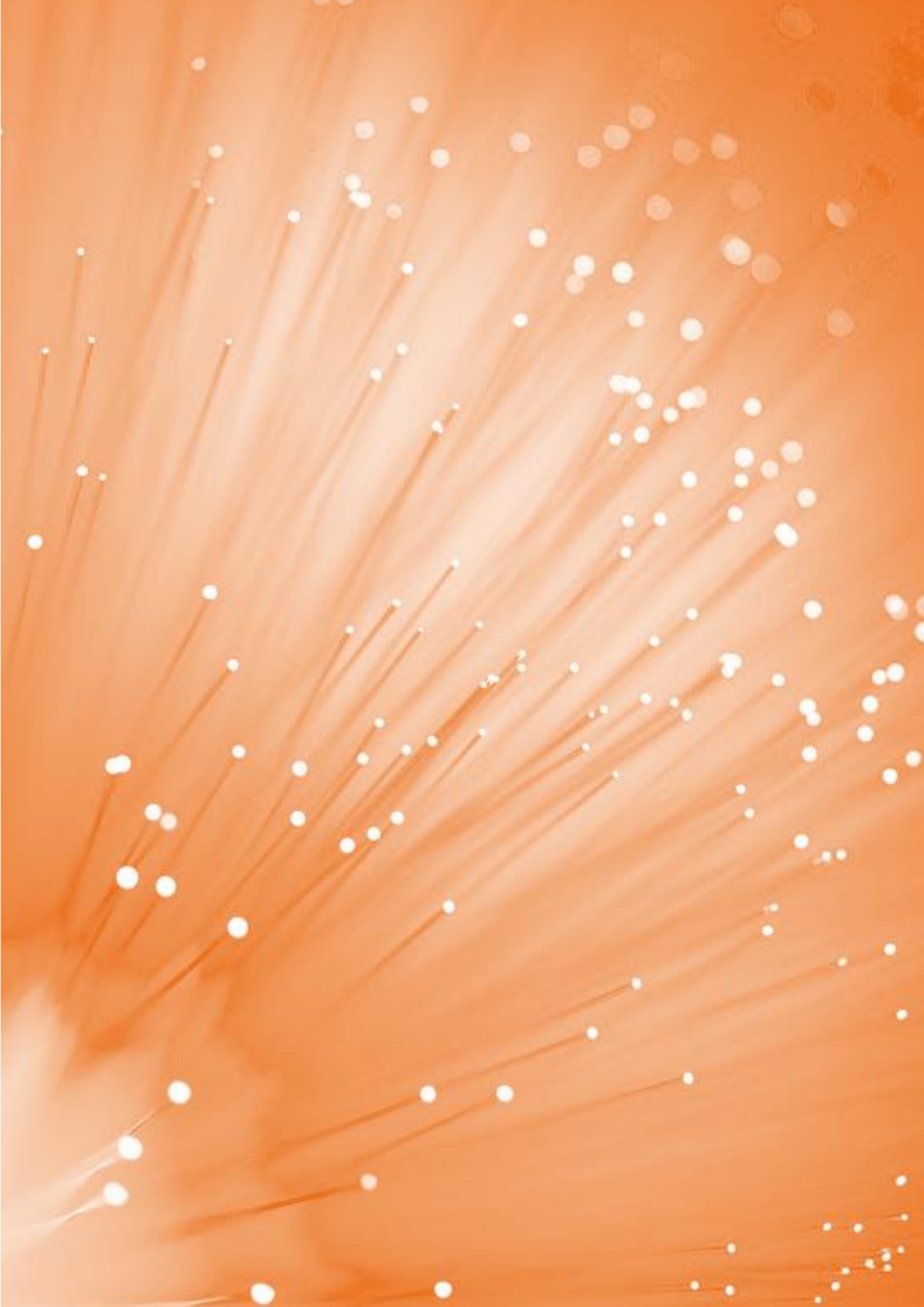
The DIZ's experience suggests that preparation comes through shared understanding, trusted relationships and a willingness to learn together. Those qualities have shaped the partnership's work to date and remain central to its relevance. While priorities may shift and structures may change, the need for collaboration, horizon-scanning and place-based thinking will remain.

This report captures a body of work built through collective effort. It also sets out an approach that can continue to support partners as digital continues to shape services, communities and opportunities across the geography of Essex and Hertfordshire.

Mike Warr

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A story of partnership and place...

The DIZ has always been shaped by an understanding that digital challenges and opportunities are experienced at the level of place rather than within the administrative boundaries of individual organisations. Connectivity, skills, data, inclusion and innovation do not align neatly with organisational structures, and the DIZ has provided a practical framework through which partners can work across those boundaries in a coordinated and purposeful way.

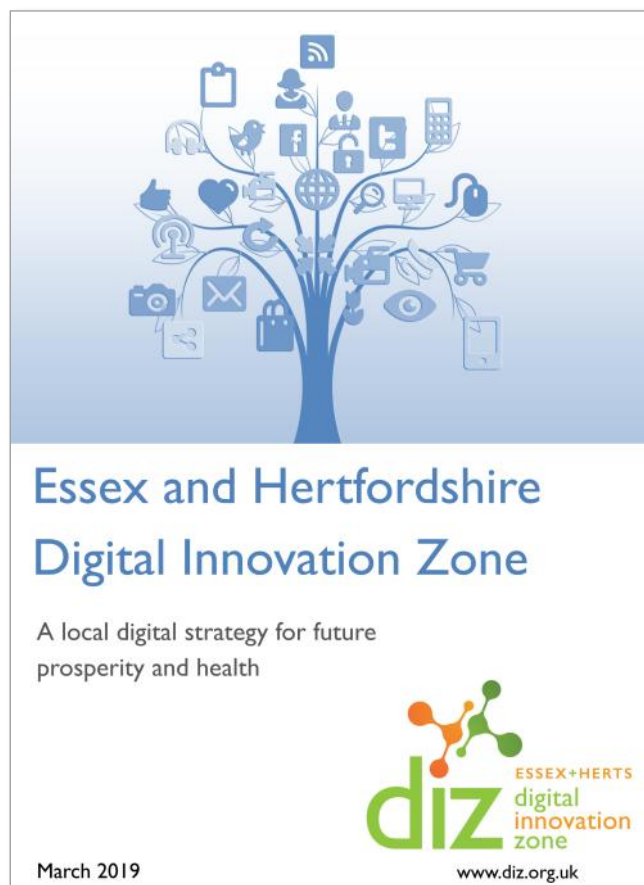
The partnership has brought together organisations that share a geography and a set of common interests, even where their formal responsibilities differ. Local authorities have been joined by partners from health, education, the community and voluntary sector, and private sector organisations, each contributing perspectives that reflect their role within the wider system. This breadth has been essential in ensuring that digital activity remains relevant to real-world needs and that solutions are informed by the experiences of those delivering and using services.

As the partnership has matured, collaboration has become more structured and more deliberate. Health partners have contributed insight into service pressures and the role digital can play in supporting new models of care. Education partners have helped shape conversations around skills, learning and workforce readiness. Community and voluntary sector

organisations have ensured that inclusion and access remain central considerations, while private sector partners have brought technical knowledge, innovation and market awareness. Together, these contributions have enabled the DIZ to take a rounded view of digital issues and to respond in a way that reflects the complexity of the place it serves.

This collaborative approach has been underpinned by the commitment of the DIZ Executive Board partners. Their financial contributions enabled the establishment of a small Programme Office, providing dedicated capacity to coordinate activity, maintain momentum and act as a neutral convenor across sectors. That capacity has been critical in translating ideas into action, connecting partners, aligning interests and ensuring that collaborative effort results in tangible outcomes rather than remaining at the level of discussion. The DIZ is very grateful to Broxbourne BC, East Herts DC, Epping Forest DC, Essex CC, Harlow Council, Hertfordshire CC and Uttlesford DC, all of whom have provided significant funding contributions throughout all or part of the existence of the DIZ.

Alongside this core funding, the DIZ has benefited from significant in-kind contributions from across the partnership. Time, expertise and leadership have been freely given through regular participation in Advisory Boards, contributions to working groups, and the



hosting and promotion of events. Partners have shared their own experiences openly, presented their work to peers, and supported the development of project ideas and funding bids. This collective effort has enabled the DIZ to operate effectively despite its small size, and has reinforced a sense of shared ownership across the partnership.

In-kind collaboration has also played an important role in shaping innovation. Partners have worked together to test ideas, explore new approaches and develop proposals that reflect shared priorities. Even where initiatives have not progressed beyond the proposal stage, the process of collaboration has strengthened relationships, improved mutual understanding and left partners better equipped to respond to future opportunities. This willingness to work together, without guarantees of immediate success, has been a defining characteristic of the DIZ's way of working.

The value of this approach has been recognised externally, including through being named Digital Leaders DLI00 Cross-Sector Collaboration of the Year. While recognition has never been the primary objective, it has helped validate the partnership's emphasis on cross-sector working and raised the profile of the place as one that is open to collaboration and willing to work differently. More importantly, it has reinforced confidence among partners that their collective effort is

delivering value.

What distinguishes the DIZ partnership is its consistent focus on benefit to place rather than organisational ownership. Projects and initiatives have been shaped around shared challenges - such as connectivity, inclusion and digital confidence - rather than individual priorities. Success has been judged through outcomes and readiness: stronger relationships, improved understanding, and greater confidence to respond to digital change, rather than through visibility or scale alone.

As local government continues to operate in an environment of change, this way of working remains highly relevant. Shifting responsibilities, evolving geographies and new pressures will continue to shape how organisations interact. The experience of working through the DIZ demonstrates that collaboration built on trust, openness and a shared sense of place can provide stability and coherence even as external conditions change.

The story of place and partnership is therefore not simply about what has been delivered, but about how organisations have chosen to work together. The DIZ has provided a practical example of what can be achieved when partners align around common goals, value each other's expertise, and commit to working collectively in the interests of the place they serve.



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A story of infrastructure...

Establishing a collaborative model that works for the benefit of 'the place' has been essential in turning shared ambition into practical delivery. Nowhere is this more evident than in the DIZ's work on digital infrastructure. Infrastructure investment is complex, capital-intensive and rarely confined to a single organisation or geography. Delivering it effectively requires alignment across partners, clarity of purpose and a willingness to coordinate effort over time.

For the DIZ, infrastructure has been understood as an enabling foundation rather than an end in itself. Reliable, high-capacity digital networks underpin public services, support economic activity and create the conditions in which innovation can take place. Without that foundation, wider ambitions around connectivity, inclusion and digital confidence are harder to realise.

One of the most significant infrastructure interventions supported through the partnership has been the delivery of full-fibre broadband connectivity to GP surgeries across west Essex and east Hertfordshire. This programme addressed constraints in broadband capacity and resilience within primary care settings, which had increasingly limited the ability of practices to adopt modern digital systems and ways of working.

Through a £1.6 million investment from central government, the DIZ worked with central government, local authorities, NHS organisations and delivery partners to coordinate the rollout of gigabit-capable, full-fibre connections to GP sites across the area. In total, 74 GP surgeries were connected, supported by the installation of an estimated more than 160,000 metres of new fibre infrastructure. The build created a robust digital backbone designed to support both immediate operational needs and longer-term service development.

The benefits of this investment were clear. At connected GP sites, average download speeds increased from 54 Mb/s to 260 Mb/s, while average upload speeds rose

from 1 Mb/s to 40 Mb/s. These improvements removed practical barriers to the use of cloud-based systems, digital records and modern communications tools, as well as delivering improved performance alongside better value for money.

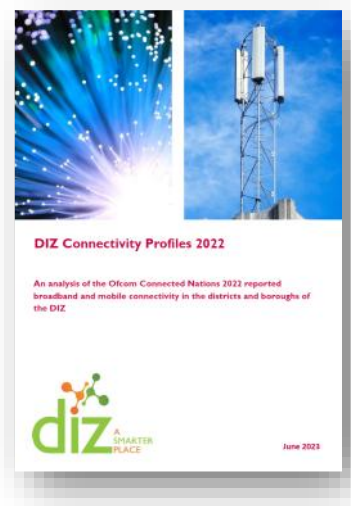
Additionally, the infrastructure delivered through this programme was capable of extending its impact beyond the GP estate, acting as a potential anchor point for wider network expansion, and potentially bringing more than 40,000 residential and business premises within reach of fibre-on-demand connectivity. This investment increased the potential reach of high-quality broadband into surrounding communities.

Programme delivery took place during a period of significant pressure on public services, including the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlighted the importance of resilient digital infrastructure in maintaining service continuity and supporting new ways of working at pace. Enhanced connectivity enabled improvements in digital communications, including the exploration of soft-telephony trials, and provided the capacity required to sustain evolving models of care.

Beyond technical outcomes, the programme demonstrated the practical value of a place-based, partnership-led approach to infrastructure delivery. By aggregating demand, aligning organisational interests and coordinating activity across boundaries, the DIZ was able to support delivery of a complex programme despite challenging conditions.

The infrastructure put in place through this work continues to provide a platform for innovation in healthcare delivery and digital service design. It illustrates how collaborative working, grounded in a shared understanding of place, can help unlock investment, reduce duplication and deliver infrastructure that supports long-term resilience rather than short-term gain.

A story of connectivity...



If it is the infrastructure described in the previous section that provides the physical foundations for digital activity, it is the connectivity laid over the top of that infrastructure that determines how those foundations are experienced in practice. For residents, businesses and public services, connectivity is the point at which investment translates into everyday use: reliable broadband that supports work and learning, mobile coverage that enables communication and access, and networks that function consistently across both urban and rural settings.

Connectivity has therefore been a central concern for the DIZ, not as a single programme of work, but as a continuing area of focus that cuts across infrastructure, economic development, service delivery and inclusion. The DIZ has approached connectivity as a shared place-based issue, recognising that gaps in coverage or performance rarely affect one organisation in isolation and that solutions are most effective when partners align their understanding.

For residents, connectivity underpins access to services, employment opportunities, education and social connection. For businesses, it shapes productivity, competitiveness and the ability to adopt new technologies. For public services, it enables digital delivery, data sharing and more flexible ways of working. These overlapping needs have informed the DIZ's emphasis on understanding connectivity in the round.

A key element of this approach has been the use of evidence to inform discussion and decision-making. Rather than relying on anecdote alone, the DIZ has worked with partners to ground connectivity conversations in recognised national datasets and structured analysis. This has helped create a shared baseline of understanding and provided a common reference point for engagement with industry and other stakeholders.

A key piece of this work was the development of local

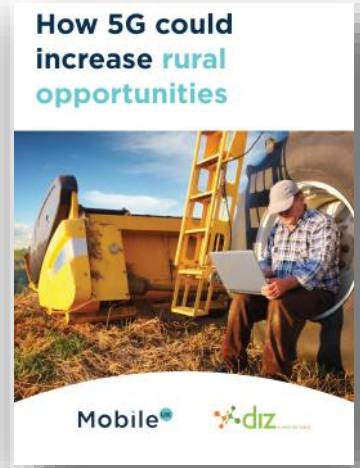
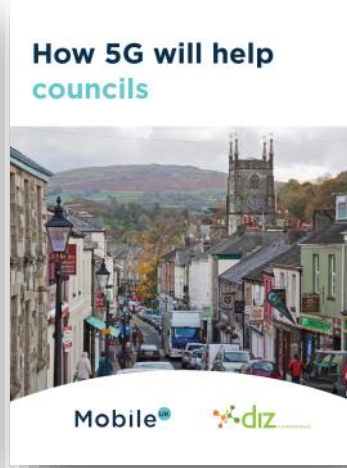
connectivity profiles based on the Ofcom Connected Nations 2022 report. These profiles provided insight into both fixed and mobile connectivity across the DIZ, highlighting areas of strong performance as well as locations where challenges remained. They showed that gigabit-capable broadband coverage across parts of the area compared favourably with national averages, while also highlighting issues such as poor commercial broadband provision and indoor mobile signal quality.

This evidence-led approach helped shift the focus of connectivity discussions from broad aspiration to practical priorities. By identifying where performance was strong and where gaps persisted, partners were able to target engagement with providers, align expectations internally, and consider how public sector assets and influence might be used to support further improvement.

Alongside fixed broadband, the DIZ has consistently treated mobile connectivity as strategically important. Mobile services play a critical role in daily life for residents and businesses, supporting communication, transactions and access to online services. They also underpin new ways of working for public sector staff, particularly those delivering services in the community or operating across multiple locations.

Recognising the need to remain engaged with emerging approaches to mobile infrastructure, the DIZ was invited to join the Early Adoption Group (EAG) for the Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator (DCIA) programme. Participation in the EAG ensured that the partnership remained close to national pilot activity and able to contribute insight based on local experience. It also reinforced the importance of understanding how planning, asset use and engagement processes can either support or hinder mobile infrastructure deployment.

A related strand of work has focused on the role of public sector assets in enabling connectivity. The DIZ has worked with partners to explore how land, buildings and street furniture might be better understood and used to



support telecoms infrastructure deployment. Engagement with organisations such as Connected Places Catapult and involvement in the review of the DCIA Data Integration Toolkit have helped inform thinking about how asset data can be brought together and used more effectively, reducing friction for both public bodies and providers.

This reflects a broader recognition that connectivity outcomes are shaped as much by process and coordination as by technology. Planning policy, asset availability, data quality and cross-organisational communication all influence the speed and feasibility of network rollout. By creating space to explore these issues, the DIZ has helped partners better understand their role within the wider connectivity ecosystem.

Industry engagement has also been an important component of the connectivity story. The DIZ has sought to maintain constructive relationships with infrastructure providers and organisations operating within the digital connectivity landscape, ensuring that the place remains visible and engaged as investment decisions are considered. Selection as one of only two areas to work with UK5G on 5G readiness was a reflection of this proactive approach and provided an opportunity to develop messaging and materials to articulate that DIZ appetite for innovation.

That work supported a refresh of connectivity-related content on the DIZ website, including guidance designed to help partners engage residents and stakeholders on mobile connectivity and 5G. Co-branded materials developed with Mobile UK have helped provide balanced, accessible information on the benefits and considerations associated with mobile infrastructure, supporting more informed local conversations.

More recently, the DIZ has taken further steps to strengthen its mobile connectivity evidence base through a crowdsourced mobile connectivity mapping platform. This tool complements national datasets by

capturing real-world user experience, helping partners visualise coverage, identify areas of concern and better understand patterns across the geography. The data generated has supported targeted engagement with providers, informed planning discussions and provided a basis for future investment conversations.

Throughout this work, the DIZ has avoided treating connectivity as a one-off challenge to be “solved”. Technology, demand and expectations continue to evolve, and connectivity requirements change accordingly. Instead, the partnership has approached connectivity as an ongoing strategic discipline: understanding current performance, monitoring change, engaging the market and enabling conditions that support improvement over time.

This approach has been particularly important given the wider context of local government. Financial pressures, changing responsibilities and evolving service models all influence how organisations engage with digital infrastructure and connectivity. Working collectively, partners have been better placed to navigate this complexity, share learning and align effort where interests overlap.

Connectivity sits naturally between infrastructure and inclusion. Infrastructure investment creates the physical networks; connectivity determines how those networks are experienced; and inclusion shapes who is able to benefit from them. By focusing on evidence, partnership and practical engagement, the DIZ has helped ensure connectivity is understood not just as a technical issue, but as a core component of a digitally resilient place.

As digital continues to shape how people live, work and interact, the need for reliable, accessible connectivity will only increase. The DIZ experience to date demonstrates the value of a place-based, collaborative approach—one that brings together data, relationships and shared intent to support connectivity that works for residents, businesses and public services alike.

A story of inclusion...

Connectivity only delivers its full value when people can make use of it. Even where broadband and mobile coverage are improving, there will still be residents and communities who face barriers - whether that is affordability, confidence, skills, access to devices, or simply not knowing where to start. For the DIZ, digital inclusion has therefore been treated as a practical counterpart to connectivity: helping partners ensure that the benefits of digital investment are shared as widely as possible, and that people are not excluded as services and everyday life become more digital.

The DIZ's role in this space has been deliberately supportive rather than directive. Digital exclusion is complex and deeply local, and the partnership has focused on creating the conditions for expert partners to succeed - by providing a forum to share learning, by connecting organisations that can help one another, and by keeping inclusion visible alongside other strands of digital work. This has included sustained support for the work of the voluntary and community sector, and close working with colleagues who lead and coordinate inclusion activity across the wider geography.

A clear example of this approach was the DIZ's support for the WECAN Digital Share programme. Digital Share has been framed as a practical, joined-up offer that responds to the everyday realities of digital exclusion - bringing together devices, data and skills support through a platform that helps manage requests and connect people to help. The continuing focus has been on ensuring that support reaches those who are most at risk of exclusion and inequality, while also strengthening the local network of organisations able to provide that support.

Building on the connectivity work, the DIZ has also helped support a place-based inclusion project focused on a sheltered housing scheme in Epping Forest, where many residents have limited experience of online activity. The project has centred on delivering communal fibre

connectivity as a foundation, but with equal attention given to what happens next: using that connection to provide tailored sessions that introduce residents to digital tools and services in ways that are meaningful to them. The intention has been to build confidence through practical applications - helping residents understand how digital can support everyday needs, reduce isolation, and improve access to services.

Another consistent feature of the DIZ's inclusion work has been the way it has used its knowledge-sharing channels to make inclusion part of the mainstream digital conversation. Digital inclusion topics have been regularly featured through guest speaker presentations, helping partners stay informed about what good practice looks like and where support is available. Recent examples have included sessions highlighting the work on the Minimum Digital Living Standard, the Digital Help Finder Tool developed by Essex County Council, and practical initiatives such as Lego in Libraries and Every Child Online, alongside wider discussion about how inclusion activity needs to change as technology and service models evolve.

Taken together, these strands reflect a grounded approach: inclusion is not treated as a standalone programme competing with other priorities, but as a thread that runs through infrastructure, connectivity and service design. As local government continues to operate in an uncertain and changing environment, the need for this focus remains. The technologies may shift and new opportunities will emerge, but the underlying requirement is consistent: to ensure that digital progress is matched by practical support that helps people participate, access services and benefit from the changes taking place.



A story of knowledge sharing...

Knowledge sharing has been a core part of how the DIZ has worked in practice. Digital change affects every organisation differently, and the pace at which new technologies, policies and expectations emerge can make it difficult for partners to stay informed and confident in their responses. The DIZ has provided a shared space in which partners can explore these issues together, exchange experience and build understanding in a way that reflects the realities of working in the public sector.

As digital issues have grown in scale and complexity, the need for structured opportunities to share insight has become more pronounced. New technologies such as artificial intelligence, evolving approaches to connectivity, rising cyber-security risks and changing expectations around digital service delivery have created both opportunities and pressures. The DIZ has responded by placing knowledge uplift at the centre of its work programme, ensuring that partners have access to relevant information and the opportunity to learn from one another as these issues develop.

This approach proved particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic, when organisations were required to adopt new digital approaches at speed. Remote working, online service delivery and digital engagement moved rapidly from being optional to essential. Through regular engagement, the DIZ enabled partners to share how they were adapting, what was working well and

where challenges were emerging. These exchanges helped reduce duplication of effort, highlighted practical solutions and reinforced the value of collective problem-solving at a time of significant pressure.

Central to this work have been the monthly DIZ Advisory Board sessions, which adopted a distinctive format focused on guest speakers rather than formal reporting. Each session typically centred on a single digital topic, introduced through a short, focused presentation from an external organisation or subject-matter expert. This format allowed partners to engage with emerging issues in a manageable way, supporting learning without placing unrealistic demands on time or capacity.

Over time, the range and depth of speakers expanded, reflecting the breadth of the digital landscape. Presentations covered topics including connectivity, cyber security, digital inclusion, data, artificial intelligence, digital skills and sustainability. Speakers were drawn from local and central government, academia, industry bodies, the private sector and the voluntary and community sector. This diversity ensured that discussions were grounded in real-world experience and exposed partners to a wide range of perspectives.

Importantly, the DIZ did not restrict these sessions to a closed group. Advisory Board meetings were routinely opened up to a wider audience, enabling colleagues from

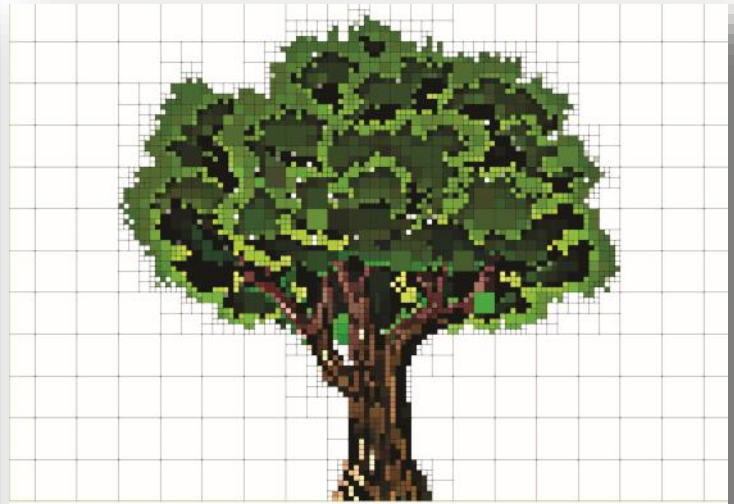


Smart Places Seminar IV

Future-Proofing Garden Towns
Through Digital

Chesterford Research Park
14th December 2018

Executive Report



How Can Digital Help Save The Planet?

An Online DIZ Smart Place Seminar

13th May 2022

Executive Report



How Can Data Transform Our Place?

An Online DIZ Smart Place Seminar

8th March 2024

Executive Report



Smart Places Seminar V

Empowering Community and Voluntary Services
Through Digital

Fletcher's Lea, Ware Priory 26th April 2019

Executive Report



A story of knowledge sharing...

(continued)



partner organisations and beyond to attend. This outward-facing approach supported the DIZ's wider ambition to share learning more broadly and to position the partnership as a trusted source of insight for the public sector. It also helped bring new voices into the conversation, strengthening relationships and broadening the collective understanding of digital issues affecting the place.

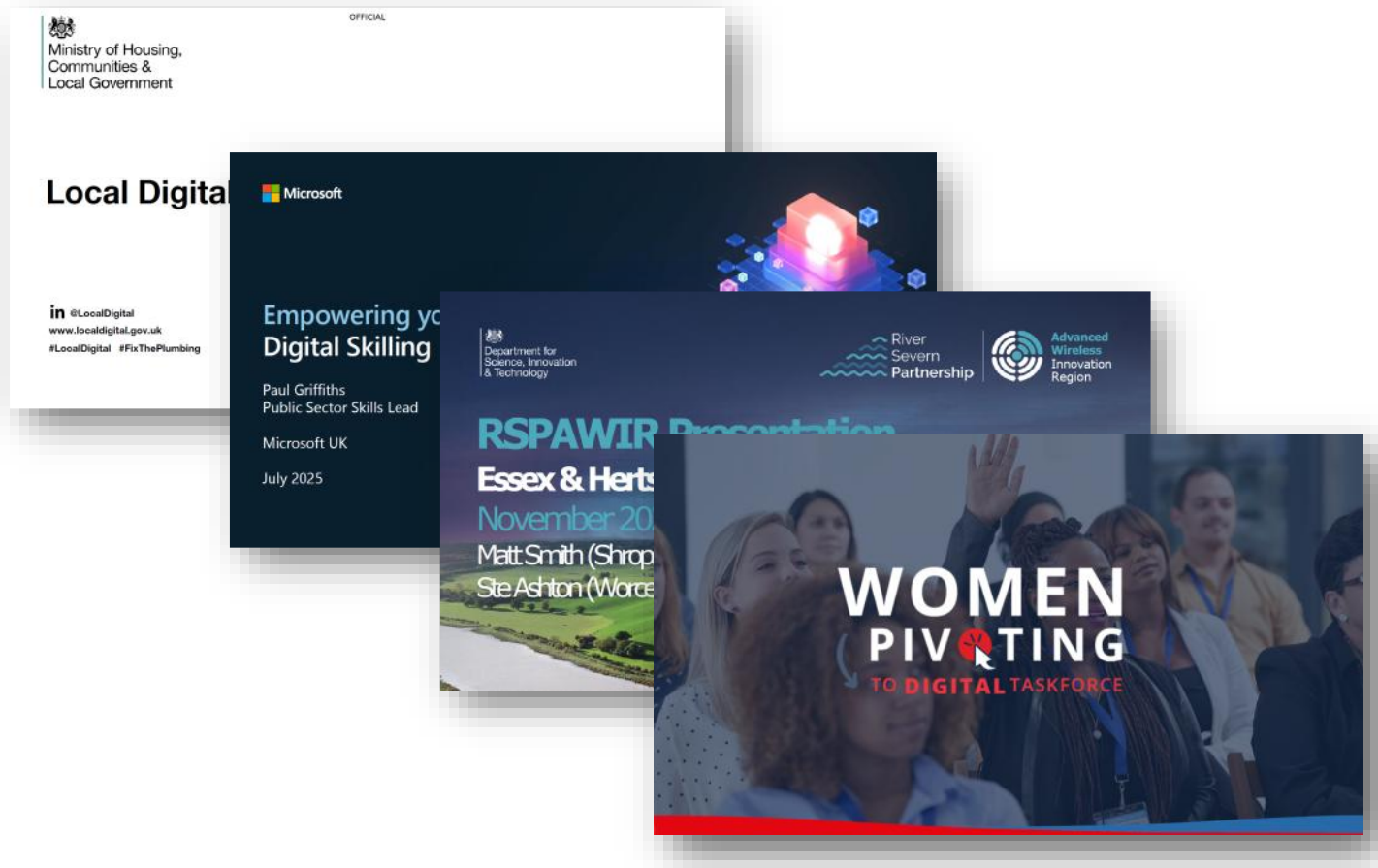
Building on the success of this model, the last year has seen a further evolution in the DIZ's approach to knowledge sharing through the launch of the Digital Innovation Forum. This development recognised that while the Advisory Board sessions were valued, there was an opportunity to increase their reach and impact by reframing them as open learning events rather than internal meetings. The Digital Innovation Forum retained the strengths of the earlier approach - short, focused sessions on a single topic - while adopting a more accessible, outward-facing format.

The introduction of the Digital Innovation Forum has resulted in increased attendance and a wider mix of participants. Sessions have attracted colleagues from a broader range of organisations, sectors and geographical areas, reflecting the relevance of the topics being explored. The range and calibre of speakers has also continued to grow, with contributions from national government departments, major technology providers,

regional innovation programmes and leading practitioners from across the public sector. This breadth reinforced the DIZ's role as a convenor and connector, bringing together insight that is locally relevant while informed by national and international experience.

Alongside live sessions, the DIZ has developed a number of complementary channels to support ongoing learning. The weekly DIZ Weblinks newsletter has become a key horizon-scanning tool for partners, providing a curated overview of developments across the digital landscape. Each edition brings together articles, reports, tools, funding opportunities and events, helping partners stay informed without needing to monitor multiple sources. Over time, the newsletter has established itself as a reliable and trusted resource, supporting both strategic awareness and day-to-day decision-making.

The DIZ has also delivered a series of Smart Place Seminars, offering deeper exploration of specific digital themes. These seminars have provided space for more detailed discussion on topics such as digital health and social care, connectivity, data, digital inclusion, digital skills and sustainability. Originally delivered as in-person events, the seminars transitioned successfully to online delivery following the pandemic. This shift increased accessibility and broadened the audience, while retaining the seminars' role as a forum for more in-depth learning and reflection.



The DIZ has also explored opportunities to deliver events, both online and ‘In Person’, with external partners such as Connected Places Catapult (CPC) and Digital Leaders. It presented the ‘Connections Café and Round Table’ event that explored how disruptive change can be driven, and how key challenges such as climate change can be tackled through collaborative innovation and cluster activities. And taking part in national events such as the Digital Leaders DL Week, Insight Live Week and Virtual Week the DIZ has delivered session on topics such as digital and the high street, and the power of collaboration. These have all helped to build the reputation of the partnership and the profile of the place.

To ensure that learning is not limited to those able to attend live events, the DIZ has invested in developing its website as a central repository for digital insight and resources. The site hosts guidance, reports and curated content across a range of digital topics, with particular emphasis on areas such as 5G technology and digital skills. And in addition to these downloadable resources, recordings of the Smart Place Seminars and Digital Innovation Forum sessions are made available for on-demand viewing. This approach helps extend the value of each session and ensures that knowledge shared through the DIZ remains accessible over time.

Considered as a whole, these activities reflect a

consistent and deliberate approach to knowledge sharing. The DIZ has not sought to present itself as the authority on digital issues, nor to promote particular technologies or solutions. Instead, it has focused on creating the conditions for informed discussion, bringing people together, sharing experience and enabling partners to build their own understanding and confidence.

This approach aligns closely with the DIZ’s wider emphasis on collaboration and place-based working. Knowledge sharing has provided the foundation for collective action, helping partners align perspectives, identify shared priorities and respond more effectively to change. As digital continues to evolve the ability to learn together, adapt and share insight will remain essential. The experience of the DIZ demonstrates how structured, inclusive knowledge sharing can strengthen partnerships and support a more confident and resilient response to the digital challenges and opportunities ahead.



Photo by [Alesia Kazantceva](#) on [Unsplash](#)

A story of innovation and sustainability...

Innovation within the DIZ has been treated as a practical activity rooted in real challenges, with the partnership open to testing new ideas and different ways of working, learning from experience and recognising that not every initiative will progress or scale. What has been important is the ability to reflect on that learning and use it to shape future decisions.

This approach has been particularly evident in work to support town centres. Partners faced similar challenges around footfall, changing behaviour and the availability of consistent data. Partner local authorities worked together through the DIZ to explore a collective response, leading to a joint procurement exercise and a single footfall monitoring solution being implemented across multiple town centres. By acting together, partners reduced duplication, improved the consistency of data and created a shared evidence base.

The DIZ has also explored more advanced analytical methods. Working with local authority and academic partners, the partnership examined how machine learning techniques could be applied to CCTV imagery to better understand patterns of movement and levels of activity within town centres. Although the exercise highlighted practical constraints as well as opportunities, it provided valuable insight into the realities of applying emerging technologies within a public sector context.

A similar learning-led mindset has shaped the DIZ's work on digital sustainability. As digital activity increases, so too does its environmental impact. In response, the partnership undertook a detailed page-by-page review of the DIZ website to understand its carbon footprint and identify opportunities for improvement. This work went beyond surface-level metrics, examining how design choices, content structure and media use affect energy consumption. The resulting changes demonstrated that sustainability gains can be achieved through relatively simple, targeted adjustments.

This project reinforced the principle that innovation and

sustainability are closely connected. Digital tools and approaches need to be assessed not only for what they enable, but for how responsibly they are deployed. By considering environmental impact alongside functionality and user experience, the DIZ has sought to encourage a more balanced approach to digital innovation.

The creation of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) has provided a practical way to support this work. SIGs have enabled partners to come together around priority areas of interest, bring forward ideas and explore potential projects in a focused setting. The High Street SIG supported collaborative exploration of digital responses to town centre challenges, while the Digital Sustainability SIG created space for partners to examine the environmental implications of digital activity and identify areas for improvement.

As a programme of activity, these examples illustrate an approach to innovation that has been careful, collaborative and reflective, with sustainability considered as an integral part of how digital activity is designed and delivered. Not every initiative has delivered a long-term solution, but each has contributed to a better understanding of what works, what does not, and why. As digital continues to evolve, this emphasis on shared learning, responsible use and collaboration provides a practical foundation for innovation that supports long-term resilience rather than short-term experimentation.

And while much of this work has focused on learning and improvement within the DIZ partnership itself, it has also attracted interest beyond the immediate geography. The willingness to explore new ideas openly, to share learning and to work across organisational boundaries has increasingly been recognised by peers across the public sector. The following section reflects on how that approach has been acknowledged through external recognition and invitations to share the DIZ experience more widely.

A story of recognition...

DIGITAL
LEADERS

100

Recognition has never been a primary driver of the DIZ's work, but it has been an important by-product of the partnership's approach. Over time, external recognition has helped validate the value of place-based collaboration, cross-sector working and a focus on practical outcomes rather than organisational ownership. In that sense, awards and invitations to speak have provided an external lens on how the DIZ's way of working is perceived beyond its immediate geography.

One of the earliest and most prominent forms of recognition came in 2020, when the DIZ was included in the Digital Leaders #DL100 list. This list highlights individuals and organisations considered to be making a meaningful contribution to digital transformation across the UK. Inclusion reflected the growing visibility of the DIZ's work and its emphasis on collaboration across local government, health, education, the voluntary sector and industry.

That same year, the partnership was further recognised when it was named 'Cross-Sector Digital Collaboration of the Year' by Digital Leaders. This award acknowledged the way the DIZ had brought together partners from different sectors to address shared digital challenges at a place level. Importantly, the recognition focused less on any single project and more on the collective approach: aligning effort, sharing learning and coordinating activity across boundaries that would otherwise fragment decision-making.

In 2021, the DIZ received an iESE Certificate of Excellence following its submission to the iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards. This recognition highlighted the quality of the partnership's work in a challenging environment and reinforced the credibility of its collaborative model within the wider public sector. Again, the emphasis was on the standard of delivery and the partnership's ability to respond to complex challenges rather than on scale or profile.

Recognition continued in 2022, when the DIZ was

named as a Finalist in the 'Public / Public Partnership' category of the LGC Awards. The Local Government Chronicle Awards are widely regarded across the sector, and finalist status provided further affirmation that the DIZ's approach to partnership working was resonating with peers and sector leaders. The nomination reflected the strength of collaboration across public bodies and the ability to work effectively beyond traditional organisational boundaries.

More recently, the partnership was recognised as a Finalist in the 'Small Scale, Big Impact' category of the Smarter Working Live Awards 2024. This recognition was particularly aligned with the DIZ's operating model: a small coordinating function supporting activity with disproportionate reach and impact through collaboration, knowledge sharing and alignment rather than direct delivery.

Alongside formal awards, the DIZ has received a growing number of invitations to speak at external events, providing further indication of interest in its place-based approach to digital innovation. These invitations have offered opportunities to share learning, contribute to wider sector discussions and test the relevance of the DIZ model in different contexts.

The partnership was invited to present at the LGA Digital Showcase in 2019, sharing its experience of cross-boundary digital collaboration with a national local government audience. This was followed by an invitation to speak at UK Authority's Smart Places event in 2020, where the focus on place-based digital approaches resonated with organisations grappling with similar challenges across diverse geographies.

In 2021, the DIZ contributed to the Connected Britain conference, speaking on the Connected Society Track. This platform brought the partnership into conversation with infrastructure providers, policymakers and other public sector organisations, reinforcing the relevance of local insight in national connectivity discussions.

“...exemplar for regional development and collaboration”

(Digital Leaders DLI00 Award Ceremony)



Further invitations in 2022 included speaking at the LGA Local Government Procurement Expo and the Local Economic Growth Conference, where the DIZ was able to reflect on how digital infrastructure, skills and collaboration support wider economic objectives. That year also saw the partnership contribute to the Western Gateway ‘Making the Vision a Reality’ report launch, where the DIZ was referenced as an example of a place-based approach that could inform activity across a broader geography.

The DIZ returned to the LGA Digital Showcase in 2023, reflecting continued interest in its approach and providing an opportunity to share learning with a new audience. More recently, engagement with Anglia Ruskin University has included speaking at a Sustainable ICT event in 2024 and delivering a guest lecture to students. These invitations have extended the reach of the DIZ’s learning into academic and skills-focused settings, supporting the exchange of ideas between practice and education.

Taken together, these forms of recognition illustrate how the DIZ’s work has been perceived externally: not as a model to be replicated wholesale, but as an approach that demonstrates the value of collaboration grounded in place. Awards and speaking opportunities have helped amplify that message, providing reassurance to partners that their collective effort is both credible and relevant.

Ultimately, recognition has served as a means of reflection rather than validation. It has reinforced confidence in a way of working that prioritises shared understanding, trust and practical cooperation. As digital continues to shape services, economies and communities, the experience of the DIZ suggests that progress is most durable when it is built collaboratively—and that recognition, when it comes, is most meaningful when it reflects that collective endeavour.





And what of the future..?

Looking ahead, the experience of the DIZ suggests that its greatest contribution has not been any single project or programme, but the way it has brought partners together to work through complexity. Digital will continue to evolve at pace, shaping how services are delivered, how organisations operate and how residents and businesses interact with the public sector. In that environment, the ability to collaborate, share learning and align effort around place-based challenges remains as important as any specific technological solution.

The work described throughout this report demonstrates that progress is most effective when partners are willing to look beyond organisational boundaries and focus on shared outcomes. That principle will continue to matter as local government adapts to changing responsibilities, new pressures and evolving geographies of influence. Future configurations of place and partnership may look different from those of today, but the underlying need to coordinate activity, pool insight and build trust will remain constant.

There is also an ongoing opportunity to build on the confidence developed through the DIZ's work. Partners are better placed to engage with emerging technologies, to assess their relevance and to explore how they might be applied responsibly and proportionately. This does not imply a single direction of travel or a fixed set of priorities. Instead, it points to an approach that remains open to experimentation, honest about uncertainty and committed to learning from experience.

As digital continues to shape public services and local economies, challenges such as connectivity, inclusion, skills, sustainability and resilience will persist, even as their form changes. Addressing them will continue to require collaboration across sectors and disciplines, informed by evidence and grounded in local context. The DIZ experience shows how creating space for dialogue and shared exploration can help partners respond more coherently to those challenges.

The future therefore presents an invitation rather than a blueprint. It is an opportunity for partners to continue working together in ways that reflect their changing context, drawing on the relationships, learning and practices established through the DIZ. As partners start to work collaboratively on the building of new unitary organisations there is value in the experiences and success of the DIZ partnership model that could be usefully applied in the future.

Whether through existing structures or new forms of collaboration, the principles that have underpinned the partnership - openness, trust and a commitment to place - provide a strong foundation for what comes next.

In a digital landscape characterised by constant change, the ability to adapt collectively may prove to be the most enduring outcome of the DIZ's work.



Further Information

If you are interested in learning more about the work programme and achievements of the DIZ you can access and download copies of the progress reports published annually throughout the existence of the partnership. These reports, as well as a number of key strategic documents, the executive reports from our series of Smart Place Seminars, and the recordings from a number of our events, can all be accessed on the DIZ website at [Resources – Digital Innovation Zone](#)

You can also get in touch with the DIZ Programme Manager + Acting Director at mwarr@eppingforestdc.gov.uk



Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank every one of the speakers, presenters, attendees, hosts and supporters that have joined us at our DIZ Advisory Boards, Digital Innovation Forum sessions, Smart Place Seminars or any of the other online or in-person events we have delivered or participated in. Sharing learning and knowledge with partners, stakeholders, organisations, businesses, and residents of the DIZ has been fundamental to our place-based approach to digital innovation over the years and we have very much welcomed and appreciated the wide interest and support these events have seen.

