

Broadband & Mobile Phone Connectivity Task Group Update Report

1. Background and Scope of Task Group Review

The background and scope for this review are detailed in the September update report which can be viewed at the link below:

<http://democracy.devon.gov.uk/documents/s10467/Task%20Group%20report.pdf>

2. Scope of update report

This content of this report is based on the evidence gathered through the methods outlined in paragraph 3 below and is intended to update the Committee and the public as such. The report does not draw any conclusions, but simply presents a summary of this evidence.

3. Work undertaken to date

On 14th September 2017 Members of the Task Group met with representatives of the business community, members of the public and parish council representatives. The objective of this meeting was to gain an insight into the experiences of individuals, communities and businesses in accessing broadband and mobile phone connections and the impact that this is having on both productivity and social connectivity. Members also undertook to hear views on Connecting Devon & Somerset's (CDS) operations, communication and transparency arrangements.

At the meeting of the Corporate Infrastructure & Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 26th September, Councillors Crabb and Hall elected to join the Task Group.

The Task Group met again on 7th November with representatives of BT Openreach, Airband, Gigaclear and Superfast Cornwall. The objective of this meeting was to understand the challenges faced during the phase 1 roll out, the working relationships between CDS and its providers, challenges and progress in relation to the phase 2 rollout and the successes of the Superfast Cornwall programme.

A further Task Group meeting was due to be held on 22nd November, meeting with the Chairs of the CDS Board and a representative from the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan team. A verbal update on this meeting will be provided at the Corporate Infrastructure & Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee meeting on 28th November.

As part of their research, the Task Group has received written evidence from the County Council's Chief Officer for Highways Infrastructure, Development & Waste, in relation to broadband works on the Highway.

The Task Group has invited Somerset County Council Scrutiny to join their review, but Somerset County Council have yet to take up this offer.

The Task Group, with support of the Scrutiny Officer, continue to undertake desk research and wider reading around the digital connectivity agenda. A full bibliography will be included in the Task Group's final report.

4. Findings to date

4.1 Business, the economy and productivity

Devon is home to a number of small businesses and has high rates of self-employment, with many people working out of rural areas. Agriculture and tourism are operating more than ever online. Newer areas of business such as science and technology are emerging in Devon but are often struggling to prosper with insufficient digital connectivity. Broadband and mobile phone connectivity is vitally important to enable businesses and individuals to undertake tasks such as maintaining a website, responding to emails, completing tax returns, purchasing and selling, using cloud based software and the use of smart phone apps (the latter has become a particular issue within agriculture).

The inconsistency of broadband and data coverage in the region has been raised as a key issue, as businesses cannot be certain about when they will have a connection and when they will not. The Task Group has also heard reports of businesses moving out of Devon to Bristol or even Cornwall, where broadband and data coverage is better and more reliable.

The report of the South West Rural Productivity Commission¹ highlights Broadband and Mobile Connectivity as a key growth theme and states that 'improving digital connectivity has the potential to be a 'game changer', but if left unresolved will result in 'left behind' communities'. This view is echoed by witnesses the Task Group has met with, and there is real concern that it is the lack of digital connectivity that is holding Devon back from competing on a national and European scale.

4.2 Communities and societal wellbeing

The impact on the economy and productivity has been the driving force for this review however the impact on community and individual wellbeing is also apparent. Digital connectivity has the potential to alleviate rural social isolation, and lack of sufficient broadband can have opposite effect. Reports of children having to leave home to complete homework were also heard.

4.3 Communication & transparency

CDS has come under criticism from businesses and communities for the lack of information it has provided on areas which will be covered in the rollout under phase 1. Communication from CDS has been dependent on Openreach being able to confirm as and when areas become live, and CDS have acknowledged that this has been frustrating for communities. This lack of clarity around coverage also created uncertainty for Airband

¹ <http://heartofswlep.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HotSW-14332-A4-Overview-report-digital-doc-FINAL.pdf>

and impacted upon their ability to publicise their deployment schedule for the National Parks.

There is however a need for CDS to manage the message around rollout, and a balance should be struck around providing timely information and providing accurate information to communities, and managing the expectations of the public.

Some believe very strongly that CDS has wilfully withheld information or provided misinformation and report that enquiries and emails have been left unanswered by CDS and some broadband operators.

CDS Board meetings are currently closed meetings and CDS have been subject to some public criticism over the management and transparency of these meetings. A brief action plan is published on the CDS website² following each board meeting.

4.4 Phase 1 – rollout and implementation

Openreach completed the rollout of phase 1 in May 2017. There has been criticism from communities and businesses in a number of areas, including the seeming exclusion of business parks from the phase 1 rollout. Openreach have responded advising that business parks have less premises per green cabinet than residential areas, which means they are less viable to prioritise, but have not been intentionally excluded.

4.5 Phase 2 – rollout and implementation

Airband's delivery in the National Parks is nearing completion.

Reports of issues around accessing online banking and other services have been expressed by some communities in the National Parks. Airband have advised that this ultimately relates to the worldwide shortage of IP addresses. As such Airband (along with other providers) make use of Network Address Translations (NATs) which create a number of 'fake' IP addresses, which sit in front of a real IP address. One downside of this is that some online banking service and other two way authentication services cannot work with these NATs. However, Airband can provide a fully functioning IP address at a cost, upon request.

Airband has recently sent 20,000 direct mail to properties within its current reach, informing communities of the service they can provide. They have also used the Devon County Show to promote their services.

Airband's rollout of Lot 4 is underway and engagement with planning authorities has been positive. However there are over 130 sites where planning permission must be sought over the next two years, and this will take time to achieve. There have been relatively few objections to proposals so far.

Gigaclear's programme beginning in November 2017 is due to conclude at the end of 2019, with contingency into early 2020. Additional funding secured by CDS has allowed for additional communities to be included in the rollout.

4.6 Commercial broadband programmes and 4G

² <https://www.connectingdevonandsomerset.co.uk/boardactionnotes/>

Openreach's commercial programme has connected 540,000 premises across Devon and Somerset, with further delivery ongoing. Extensive EE 4G coverage already exists in Devon and EE are trialling techniques to provide localised 4G coverage, typically in rural areas.

In terms of new developments, it is for the developer to decide if they wish to lay fibre to the premise in a new site, and even though the cost per premise is relatively low, cost is a factor for developers. Early communication between operators and developers is helpful.

Both Airband and Gigaclear also operate a commercial programme in Devon.

4.7 The very rural

Previous voucher schemes enabled many people who were not covered by either commercial programmes or phase 1 or 2 delivery to fund bespoke solutions. Openreach however, not being a retail service provider, were not able to engage in the voucher scheme.

Airband have been trialling White Space technologies as a potential solution for the very hard to reach, 2-3% of properties.

Gainshare monies from the Phase 1 rollout with Openreach are now available to CDS. A range of witnesses have suggested that this should be used to fund alternative provision for very rural and hard to reach communities, potentially in the form of self-help/match funding.

4.8 Delays, challenges and barriers to progress

There is concern from communities that there has been a great deal of delay in the rollout of superfast broadband, particularly in relation to the re-procurement exercise following the CDS decision to not to award the extension programme to BT. Other concerns relate to the management of the procurement process by CDS.

Where new fibre cable is being laid through private land, negotiations with landowners can be challenging and slow down progress.

The laying of fibre cable is time consuming, particularly for fibre to the premise technology, with the average length trench being 28km. In very rural areas, the distance between properties means that longer trenches are needed and therefore there is a long lead in time from the point that digging begins until the completion of delivery.

Both Gigaclear and Openreach have to work closely with relevant highways authorities to gain permissions for trench digging and other works affecting the highway. Overall, relationships with Devon County Council's Highways Team have been positive.

Gigaclear are keen to explore using narrow trenching methods which allows for faster laying of fibre. It is crucial for the County Council's Highways Team to protect the highway asset and as such, they have expressed concerns about narrow trenching methods, citing evidence of negative experiences in other highway authority areas. A trial has taken place

in Upton in East Devon, which has illustrated some real challenges. Both the County Council and Gigaclear are committed to working together to find a solution.

For Airband, one of the key challenges around delivery is obtaining planning permission for their transmitter masts. This has been particularly complex in the National Parks; natural materials have been used.

4.9 Future delivery

CDS asks all operators to provide details of their commercial delivery plans for the next three years, which informs their decisions about publically funded rollout.

There is a potential role for Members in undertaking pragmatic conversations with communities about their needs and potential solutions.

Gigaclear's fibre to premise infrastructure is able to transmit very high speeds, and will be capable in future of achieving 1000mbps, providing a future proof solution.

Airbands' technology allows for the upgrading of its infrastructure in a relatively inexpensive way and therefore provides plenty of capacity to increase speeds in the future.

State aid rules do not prevent operators from offering alternative broadband provision in areas already covered by CDS; this is commercial reality and provides communities with a choice of operator.

4.10 Superfast Cornwall

The Superfast Cornwall programme began back in 2010, with considerable EU funding. An open market tender resulted in a partnership with BT. The partnership is now moving into the third phase of delivery, with both fibre to the cabinet and fibre to the premise technology being utilised. The third phase is focussing on those communities with the sub 15 Mbps connections.

The partnership with BT has generally been very positive and Openreach have taken a flexible and agile approach, picking up as many additional properties as possible. There have been challenges around reaching some locations, such as the Isles of Scilly, and very new technologies and working practices have been used to achieve these connections.

5. Next Steps

The Task Group plans to continue to meet with further witnesses as necessary, and at this stage plans to publish its final report in early 2018.

6. Membership

Councillors Alistair Dewhirst (Chairman), Kevin Ball, Ray Bloxham, Paul Crabb, Ian Hall and Andrew Saywell.

**Councillor Alistair Dewhirst
Chairman**