

Report of the Cabinet Member Economy and Skills

Introduction

I have been asked by Councillor Atkinson to report on the region's access to superfast broad band, to include issues such as:

- what steps CDS is taking and intends to take to enforce penalty charges against BT for poor performance in the roll out of its current contract to provide superfast broadband and its failure to provide adequate broad band speeds from its current investment? As the signal depletes the further away businesses and residents are from the cabinets provided will the council report on why BT has failed to invest in sufficient cabinets to relay superfast broadband to customers?
- how many properties currently fail to meet the superfast broadband speeds when based on the proposed changes for testing from the current 10% of BT customers at peak times to 50%?
- whether Devon will benefit from any new money alleged to be up to £500million to support AI, 5G mobile connectivity and Full Fibre Broadband?
- why BT has failed in the current contract to provide full fibre connectivity in this current contract?

I have been further asked by Councillor Dewhirst to report on the following:

“In the light of the Chancellor's £3billion expenditure on Brexit preparations, will the Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills brief the Council on what preparations his department have made for this event? Can he say if the County Council, along with the attendees at the recent Heart of the South West LEP Annual General Meeting, believe that the risks of Brexit now outweigh the opportunities for businesses and the people of Devon?”

Response

Broadband

The request for a report also included some specific issues which I also need to respond to because of incorrect views. The phase 1 contract delivered by BT ended earlier this year, at the end of March, so it was completed on time and has delivered the target of 278,000 premises that are now able to now connect to a superfast service. The Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) Programme is only responsible for extending the infrastructure which allows access to superfast broadband where the commercial sector have no current plans to invest, commercial is where a provider has plans to expand their network as a result of their own investments. To be clear, the County Council is not responsible for a broadband provider's commercial plans and is not able to hold them to account for poor service, speeds, delivery and investment, any questions about these aspects need to be taken up with the various providers direct.

The County Council through the Connecting Devon and Somerset programme regularly checks for the commercial plans of all providers. Residents and businesses need to contact their broadband supplier directly to buy a new superfast contract. Contracts awarded earlier this year to Gigaclear and Airband are mobilising with first customers planned to go live in early 2018. Deployment Plans will be announced soon, but will provide infrastructure that will allow a further 60,000 homes and businesses access to faster broadband through the CDS programme. The phase two contracts are stimulating additional competition and on the back of this we are seeing more commercial investment e.g. Blackdown Hills which has produced commercial plans outside of the CDS envelope.

There will, however, still be a proportion of homes and businesses not covered commercially or through one of the above contracts and the County Council, working as part of CDS, continues to seek solutions and funding to support as many people as possible. An Expression of Interest was submitted under Government's Local Full Fibre Network fund, DEFRA funding opportunities are being explored and the CDS Board are considering the approach to be taken to spend early Gainshare from BT. There are also opportunities for industry to access funding, including Department of Culture, Media and Sports 5G Trails and Testbeds programme. This is an opportunity for industry, and not local authorities. The Council is engaging with providers about the opportunities they may have, however there is limited support for the first wave of funding given the short application deadlines set by Government and the requirements of industry. The Council will continue to engage with the sector and promote the opportunity when a second wave of funding is announced.

Brexit Preparations

I would refer Councillor Dewhirst to the response given by the Leader earlier in the meeting, as outlined below for ease of reference.

Brexit should create opportunities for Devon, but it might also entail some potentially significant challenges. However, there is currently considerable uncertainty about the arrangements that will be in place on key issues such as trade and migration after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union (EU) in March 2019. The Council is monitoring national developments closely and stands ready to support local businesses and residents to seize the opportunities that arise. Until details emerge, it is not possible to answer whether the risks outweigh the opportunities.

I have nothing further to add at this stage.

Councillor Stuart Barker
Cabinet Member
Economy and Skills