

Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Monday, 10 October 2016, - 10.00 am

Present:

Minutes

Mr P A Tuthill (Chairman), Mr G J Vickery (Vice Chairman), Mr A A J Adams, Ms P Agar and Mr M E Jenkins

Also attended:

Dr K A Pollock, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy, Skills and Infrastructure

Steve Henderson, Regional Director, Next Generation Access

Rob Shakespeare, BT Contracts Manager

Rachel Hill (Strategic Commissioner, Major Projects), Steve Ashton (Broadband Project Officer) and Jo Weston (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. Presentation handouts for item 5 (circulated at the Meeting)
- C. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 1 July 2016 (previously circulated).

(Copies of documents A and B will be attached to the signed Minutes).

250 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies had been received from Councillors Amos and Thomas.

251 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

252 Public Participation

None.

253 Confirmation of the Minutes of the previous meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 1 July 2016 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

254 Superfast

Representatives from BT Group and Worcestershire

Broadband Update

County Council had been invited to the meeting.

The Strategic Commissioner reminded the Panel that as part of the first contract with the Council, there was a requirement for BT to report to Scrutiny on an annual basis and discussions had been had in 2014 and 2015.

By way of presentation, the Regional Director outlined the progress made against Contract 1 targets and the upcoming work and challenges associated with Contract 2.

Contract 1 ran from August 2013 to June 2016 and had been successfully completed, with some targets being exceeded, including faster fibre broadband being available to over 90% of residential and business premises in the County. In addition, the whole County could access speeds in excess of 2 megabits per second (Mbps), although this may be through a voucher scheme in more remote locations.

Contract 2 commenced in August 2016 with the purpose of increasing the fibre coverage in the County, specifically the number of premises with access to superfast speeds, defined as 24 Mbps and above. By the end of September 2017 the target of 94% of premises to receive superfast speeds is expected to be achieved.

During the successful roll out of Contract 1, a number of challenges were overcome. Examples included co-ordinating road closures, complicated wayleaves (whereby consent was granted for access to private land) and vandalism of cables.

In addition to the new infrastructure, the Contract also required activity to ensure residents and businesses were aware of the availability of faster broadband and the need to 'sign-up' in order to benefit. Promotion had been ongoing and wide ranging, from locally placed posters, stickers and fully wrapped cabinets to advertising at events such as Worcestershire County Cricket Club and through the local media. A number of businesses had also agreed to provide case studies to show the positive impact of Superfast Worcestershire. The website www.superfastworcestershire.com was constantly updated with news and examples of good practice.

Take up had been positive, with over 30% of premises now subscribing to fibre broadband. For cabinets installed for over 350 days, the figure increased to 34%.

In the ensuing discussion, the following main points were made:

- It was clarified that residents and businesses would need to upgrade their internet provision to fibre broadband and as some may be locked into an existing ordinary broadband contract, it could be a number of months before being able to switch over without incurring a penalty. It was not the case that speeds would automatically be increased when cabinets were installed
- One Member suggested that take up of 30% was not very high, however it was pointed out that it depended on the current speed and whether people were satisfied with that
- Although the 100% coverage of speeds in excess of 2 Mbps was potentially through a voucher scheme (which was up to the value of £400 for the provision and installation of equipment), it was clarified that a financial contribution from the homeowner would be required if costs were higher and for ongoing costs. It was known that communities were working together to combine vouchers to bring in alternative solutions, that would not be viable through an individual voucher alone
- Members were interested to know how a resident would know what the difference in speed may bring and examples were given, such as a multi occupancy household with multiple devices streaming television at the same time needing approximately 80 Mbps. It was also noted that new technology, such as ultra-definition television, needed a minimum speed to function. From a business perspective, it was highlighted that many more transactions could be done online, whereas previously they would have required a postal service
- In relation to new ways of working in an increasing digital age, it was also highlighted that residents were expected to be more self-sufficient, whether it be renewing library books or applying for a job. Equally, many employees were working more flexibly and at home
- When asked whether the Council was getting value for money from the contracts, the Strategic Commissioner stated that at the time there had been a full tendering process and there was a robust monitoring system in place throughout, with formal quarterly meetings providing quality assurance to the process. Checks were also

made to ensure that neighbouring authorities were not also invoiced for work which may cross the County border. To assess value for money it was possible to analyse the cost per premises against other authorities

- Although pre planning was vital and indications on installation timescales were advertised on the internet at www.superfastworcestershire.com it was never possible to know at premises level when superfast broadband would be available due to routing issues or troublesome wayleaves
- Some Members felt that communication to residents needed to be improved. It was noted that more detailed maps would not be beneficial as it set unrealistic expectations. The Panel asked that Local Member knowledge be utilised further, especially those who had links to Parish Council communications as the more take up, the increased return on investment the Council would receive
- There was a strong working relationship between Worcestershire County Council and BT, and as a whole Worcestershire was in a good position with excellent take up to date. The demand and take up was faster than any neighbouring local authority
- Members were reminded that the contract was open for a further seven years and the Council had already received earlier access to 'gainshare' monies from the Contract of £2.19m. The Council's Cabinet and full Council had previously agreed to reinvest this and any future monies up to £3.25m
- The fibre infrastructure was future proof, however, the end product could be refreshed as new technologies emerged. As the network was the responsibility of BT, they would ensure all cabinets were upgraded or repaired over time. As uptake increased, cabinet extensions could be investigated and with over 400 providers of broadband the market was very competitive
- Demand for superfast broadband varied and as such it was not always possible to fulfil residents wishes in a timely manner. An example was given whereby a cabinet became full very quickly, yet an additional cabinet took some time to be installed. This caused frustration in the locality
- The Cabinet Member was pleased with the progress to date and gave real examples of business being improved due to the County investment.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their participation. It was extremely positive that coverage was so high and that uptake was increasing however further publicity was necessary, especially in the more rural areas of the County and Local Members could be very useful assets. More information was required to answer questions around value for money and this would be investigated further in due course.

The meeting ended at 12.00 pm

Chairman