

SCRUTINY ADVISORY BOARD – COMMUNITIES AND PLACE

Meeting date: 24th September 2020

From: Executive Director Economy & Infrastructure

Digital Infrastructure Strategy

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 This report is provided to give an overview of the proposed Digital Infrastructure Strategy for comment before submission to Cabinet for their consideration.

2.0 Issues for Scrutiny

2.1 Scrutiny is invited to comment on the draft Digital Infrastructure Strategy.

3.0 Background

3.1 Digital infrastructure, both fixed line and mobile connectivity, is an important component necessary to deliver the Council Plan 2018-2022 and a critical programme within the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal. It is crucial for delivery of the Council's Customer Strategy, ICT plan and Workforce Plan, which aims take advantage of digital technology and software to deliver services.

3.2 Digital connectivity improvement across the county is also a priority for the Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership and central to their strategic Economic Plan for the county.

3.3 The universal availability of adequate broadband has been shown to be beneficial for supporting equality and cultural diversity nationally. Equality Impact Assessments have shown no major equality issues with digital infrastructure investment.

3.4 The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that digital connectivity is critical to societal resilience and business continuity in times of crisis. From getting the latest information and health guidance, home working, education and learning, online access to food and supplies, staying connected to family and others, to maintain supply chains and sourcing PPE and equipment – we all now depend on the ability to connect remotely across distance.

- 3.5 The importance of the digital infrastructure strategy is therefore increasing, as it becomes more critical to the lives of residents and the operation of businesses. A clear, simple strategy will help the Council to encourage investment, influence Planning Authorities in developing policies and support work to develop programmes to invest public funding into the hardest to reach areas.
- 3.6 Historically digital connectivity infrastructure in Cumbria has been poor in comparison to the rest of the UK. This is due to the county's geographical challenges and general rurality which increase the cost of deploying and maintaining infrastructure while offering a perceived low return on investment.
- 3.7 Through works under the Connecting Cumbria programme superfast contracts, managed through a partnership between the Council and British Telecom Plc, and commercial broadband network deployment programmes there has been significant improvement in access to superfast broadband since 2012 with almost 94% of properties now able to access services of at least 30Mbps. 4G coverage has also improved significantly since 2017 through the work of the commercial programmes preparing to support the new 4G based emergency services network. However more investment is still needed to reach underserved areas and ensure that Cumbria does not fall behind the rest of the UK again.

Covid 19

- 3.8 Digital connectivity has been critical during the Covid 19 lockdown and ongoing restrictions. Children and students have needed to continue their education online. Those shielding have needed to order shopping and access healthcare via video-calls. Workers and businesses have had to move to remote working on a massive scale.
- 3.9 It is expected that many of these changes will become long term and it is expected that work patterns post Covid-19 will feature more home working and flexible working. Business models will have a bigger online presence and the Council must be able to deliver as many of its services digitally to as many citizens as possible.
- 3.10 As we work to support recovery in the county we expect to see:
- Rural homes with good connectivity becoming more attractive.
 - Agriculture will need support as they look at direct online consumer sales.
 - An increase in domestic tourism, but with greater sensitivity to digital connectivity.
 - Pervasive contactless payment in an increasingly cashless society e.g. at market stalls.
 - Online trading as consumer first choice.

Draft Digital Infrastructure Strategy

- 3.11 The focus of the draft strategy is to maximise deployment of full fibre and mobile infrastructure, which generally relies upon access to full fibre for mast backhaul, in order to support:
- Economic growth and particularly in key industries such as agriculture (agri-tech) and tourism.
 - Digital inclusion so that no resident or business is left behind – (out of scope)¹.
 - Delivery of more effective and efficient provision of local public services.
- 3.12 To support the delivery of the strategy, and ensure that Cumbria's voice is heard, Digital Champions will be nominated. It is proposed that the champion at Cabinet level will be the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Property and at officer level will be the Executive Director for Economy and Infrastructure.
- 3.13 The Strategy comprises seven programmes or projects which will form the action plan for strategy delivery:
- i. Complete the Connecting Cumbria superfast contract with British Telecommunications Plc – contractual target is for works to complete by 30th March 2021².
 - ii. Digital Borderlands full fibre voucher top-up scheme. This scheme was launched in June 2020 as one of the first projects under the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal and provides top up funding to rural communities in superfast not spots who are seeking to use UK Government Rural Gigabit Connectivity Vouchers to install gigabit capable infrastructure³.
 - iii. Facilitate gigabit capable connections to eligible hub sites through the UK Government Rural Gigabit Connectivity hubs programme, which has focused on primary schools, as well as seeking to develop funding opportunities for other types of rural community hub locations.
 - iv. Work with UK Government to maximise Cumbria's share of the £5bn of funding for gigabit capable connections to the hardest to reach 20% of premises in the UK⁴.
 - v. Secure funding and mobilise the Digital Borderlands 4G infill programme to improve mobile connectivity across the whole of Cumbria and the Borderlands as a part of the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal.

¹ The digital infrastructure strategy will support digital inclusion and development of skills but these programmes will not be part of the scope of the strategy. Supporting the development of digital skills and attracting those with such skills into the County is recognised as extremely important. However without upfront investment in high quality digital connectivity such skills development programmes are not effective.

² <http://www.connectingcumbria.org.uk/when-and-where.asp>

³ <https://www.borderlandsgrowth.com/Digital-Voucher-Scheme>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-telecoms-infrastructure-review>

- vi. Work with the UK Government Shared Rural Network mobile programme, which is seeking to deliver 95% geographical 4G coverage in the UK from at least one Mobile Network Operator by 2025, to maximise investment in Cumbria.
 - vii. Work with partners on 5G research and development projects, focused on creating opportunities for communities to develop networks and services that suit their needs.
- 3.14 The overall strategy will inform the Council's contributions to public consultations, development plans, corporate plans and the development of business cases for public investment.

Catherine Weldon
PMO Specialist
28th August 2020

Please ensure that every part of this section where there is an asterisk is completed in accordance with the instructions before sending the report to Legal and Democratic Services, (please delete this sentence, prior to release).*

Appendices

Appendix A – Draft Digital Infrastructure Strategy Scope

Previous Relevant Council or Executive Decisions *[including Local Committees]*

No previous relevant decisions.

Background Papers

No background papers

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