

Report to	Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting	23rd January 2020
Lead Member / Officer	Leader/Head of Business Improvement & Modernisation
Report author	Barry Eaton, Chief Digital Officer
Title	Broadband and Mobile Networks in Rural Areas

1. What is the report about?

1.1 To detail the work being undertaken by the Council with respect of securing better connectivity in rural areas, in line with the recommendations of the November 2018 WAO report on Local Government Services to Rural Communities, specifically in relation to broadband and mobile networks in rural areas.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To provide information regarding current activities in relation to broadband and mobile networks in rural areas.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That the Committee having considered the information provided in this report, provides observations and supports the activities detailed within.

4. Report details

Delivery of Superfast Broadband

Although in last few years significant progress has been made in the delivery of broadband in Denbighshire with approximately 90% of properties covered, this is predominately in urban areas which have higher population density. The remaining 10% without Superfast is almost exclusively in our more rural areas.

The County Council is represented at a regional level by the Council Leader on the North Wales Economic Ambition Board and Officers attend all meetings in relation to the North Wales Growth Deal and Superfast Broadband delivery which is within the remit of the Digital subgroup.

Although not funded by the Growth Deal, this work has secured improved connectivity to schools, libraries and public buildings funded by the Department for Culture Media and Sport through its Local Full Fibre Networks Challenge Fund. Additionally, Denbighshire requested the inclusion of an additional 37 sites in rural areas which we believe will significantly improve and enhance the availability of Superfast Broadband in those areas. Open Reach have scheduled completion of this work by April 2021.

In addition, the County Council's Superfast Broadband Project Board has delivered a community broadband public workshop, to outline the activities the council can support in relation to meeting the objectives set out in the Corporate Plan concerning the delivery of superfast broadband and mobile networks. The workshop was well received and attended and we plan to do more in workshops in the future. Work is also underway in the Nantglyn area on a pilot project to deliver superfast broadband to the community.

The Council works proactively across the region and with Welsh Government to support the rollout of Superfast by Open Reach and wherever possible influence the rollout plans for Denbighshire. Although any rollout of Superfast is welcome, there will still be properties unable to connect and through our work with community groups and the pilot project, we are endeavouring to assist them in developing their own solutions to achieve their connectivity requirements. Current estimates are that approximately 1000 properties will fall into this category.

Officer resources to assist in the delivery of these activities will be improved this year by the appointment of a full time Digital Support Officer (interviews January 2020), part funded by the Leader Project through European funding.

Mobile Networks

The Council actively engages with mobile network providers and has provided a single point of contact in the Council. Through representation at regional and national forums and groups the Council actively supports, although significant progress has been made in the roll out of 3 and 4G across Denbighshire, the availability of fit for purpose mobile networks and coverage in the more remote areas remains challenging.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

By supporting the activities in this report, the committee contributes to the delivery of corporate priorities detailed in the corporate plan in relation to digital exclusion and the availability of fit for purpose superfast broadband and mobile connectivity.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

Funding has already been allocated in the Corporate Plan

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

A well-being impact assessment is not required for this report.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

Consultation was undertaken in the development of the Corporate Plan priorities.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

Not Required

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

The Council has limited control of the rollout of broadband as the Council has no statutory powers to intervene. This risk is mitigated by the Council's active engagement with Welsh Government and local communities.

11. Power to make the decision

Article 7.2.3 stipulates that Scrutiny may consider any matter which effects the Council's area or its inhabitants.

Article 7.4.2(b) outlines Scrutiny powers with respect of the Council's performance in relation to policy objectives, performance targets and/or specific service areas.