

<b>Report to</b>	<b>Performance Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>18<sup>th</sup> April 2024</b>
<b>Lead Member / Officer</b>	<b>Cllr. Emrys Wynne, Lead Member for Broadband and Digital Strategy</b>
<b>Head of Service</b>	<b>Liz Grieve, Head of Housing and Communities Service</b>
<b>Report author</b>	<b>Philip Burrows, Digital Officer</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Poor Internet Connectivity in Denbighshire</b>

## **1. What is the report about?**

1.1. The internet connectivity status of properties in Denbighshire.

## **2. What is the reason for making this report?**

2.1. To provide information regarding the internet and telephony status in Denbighshire.

## **3. What are the Recommendations?**

That the Committee:

3.1. reviews and understands the information provided regarding the current situation of internet and telephony connectivity in Denbighshire; and

3.2. determines whether further scrutiny of specific connectivity issues is required.

## **4. Report details**

4.1. Out of the total 50,501 premises in Denbighshire, 2,690 premises receive internet speeds of 30Mbps or less and 1,145 premises receive internet speeds of 10Mbps or less. (See Appendix A for more detail.)

- 4.2. 'Helping residents to understand options and solutions for improved internet connectivity' is an aim within our Corporate Plan and DCC have invested in a Digital Officer post (from February 2020 to May 2025) to advise individuals, businesses, and communities on this.
- 4.3. The Digital Officer works closely with Members and City, Town and Community Councils when advising communities.
- 4.4. This is important because the connectivity landscape and options for improvement are complex to navigate, owing to the following factors:
- i) There is no legal obligation on Openreach to connect every property with fibre.
  - ii) Openreach are the only fibre provider who are actively upgrading the rural areas.
  - iii) Denbighshire County Council, the Welsh Government and UK Government, have no power to influence how a private company (Openreach) runs its business. We can only encourage them to install more fibre into our county by supporting residents to access UK Government 'Gigabit Voucher' scheme.
  - iv) The 'Gigabit Voucher' scheme can only be accessed if numerous eligibility criteria are met, and often requires residents to work as a collective to pool their vouchers together for the value to cover the cost of install through the formation of a 'Fibre Community Partnership'. However, this is a time-consuming process and sometimes still is not enough to meet the cost.
  - v) The UK Government 'Gigabit Voucher' Scheme ends in March 2025. It has been inaccessible for the past 12 months due to the UK Government's 'Project Gigabit'. Until this project decides which premises in Denbighshire will be upgraded, the Voucher scheme remain closed to us.
  - vi) Small areas have been released from 'Project Gigabit' and are eligible for vouchers.
  - vii) Openreach will not start any new Community lead Fibre Community Partnerships due to the 'Gigabit Voucher' ending in March 2025.
  - viii) Alternative technologies such as wireless connections, satellite and 4G are available but are not always the best solution for residents.
- 4.5 The Council is also represented on the Ambition North Wales Digital Board and Digital Programmes. This work is at a strategic and regional level and concentrates on improving digital infrastructure across the region. The changing commercial and

policy intervention environment makes this work challenging due to commercial changes and announcements from OpenReach and interventions from the UK government which can result in North Wales Ambition Board projects becoming no longer viable or required as the commercial rollouts and UK Government's interventions progress. This work is medium to long term and as such projects are subject to change to reflect the changing environment.

## **5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Plan 2022 to 2027: The Denbighshire We Want?**

5.1. This work relates to the 'A Better Connected Denbighshire' priority, specifically the aim about 'Helping residents to understand options and solutions for improved internet connectivity, including through Fibre Community Partnerships.'

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

6.1. There are no costs associated with the production of this report.

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

7.1. Not required for this report.

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

8.1. A similar report was submitted to Scrutiny in 2023.

## **9. Chief Finance Officer Statement**

9.1. Not required.

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

10.1. If the UK Government 'Gigabit Voucher' Scheme is not renewed in March 2025, we will not be able for pay for fibre to be brought in to the rural areas via Openreach's Fibre Community Partnership.

- 10.2. UK Government has stated that some very hard to reach premises will be too expensive to connect via fibre.
- 10.3. The Welsh Government are planning a new connectivity programme called 'Extending High Speed Broadband Reach in Wales'. This will provide a connection of 30mbps to some very hard to reach premises.
- 10.4. There is an identified risk that the planned interventions of the North Wales Ambition Board's digital programmes could impact on OpenReach's decisions to change its commercial plans in the region, including in Denbighshire, where the digital footprint is improving.
- 10.5. The Openreach Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) also known as the copper-based exchanges, will be turned off by December 2025. Premises using the fibre-based VoIP system should know they will lose emergency landline phone use in the event of a power cut. If their modem and phone do not have electricity, they cannot make a phone call. On the old copper-line based system, the small amount of electricity carried over copper-lines powered the phone. This is more problematic in areas with no 4g signal. The Digital Officer will work to inform communities of this risk and seek to find other solutions where possible.

## **11. Power to make the decision**

- 11.1. Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000.
- 11.2. Section 7.2.3 stipulates that Scrutiny can consider any matter which affects the Council's area or its inhabitants.