



Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	CABINET - 10 JANUARY 2022
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM 14
Subject	BROADBAND DELIVERY UPDATE
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Tony Dale, Cabinet Member for Economy and Council Transformation Email: tony.dale@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Paul James, Economic Development Lead Email: paul.james@cotswold.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To update Members on progress in delivering high speed broadband across the District
Annexes	None.
Recommendation/s	<p>a) <i>That progress in delivering high speed broadband across the District is noted.</i></p> <p>b) <i>That the £500k allocation for broadband in the capital budget set aside in 2016 remains in place.</i></p> <p>c) <i>That Officers work with Fastershire to draw up a top-up scheme for their existing Community Broadband Grant, for approval by Cabinet, to assist with delivery of broadband within the District that would otherwise not be viable.</i></p> <p>d) <i>That any requests for drawdown of the capital allocation in the meantime are subject to business case approval by Cabinet/Council as necessary.</i></p> <p>e) <i>That annual updates on broadband delivery within the District are brought to Cabinet.</i></p>
Corporate priorities	Ensure the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are accessible to everyone in the district
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Cotswold Economic Advisory Group, Fastershire



1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Broadband is nowadays viewed as an essential utility, alongside heating, electricity and running water. It is necessary for many households to be able to access basic services, as well as for businesses to be able to function effectively. During the pandemic, with people ordered to work from home where possible, the need for good broadband has come into sharp focus. The lack of good quality broadband is one factor which can lead to digital exclusion and this can contribute to social isolation as well as having obvious economic disadvantages. Delivery of broadband is a greater challenge in rural areas due to the sparsity of the population, which increases costs and means there are fewer customers for it to be delivered commercially than in urban areas.

2. PROGRESS UPDATES

- 2.1. Delivery of broadband is largely a commercial activity, with the market dominated by a number of large providers such as BT, EE, TalkTalk, Sky, Vodafone and Virgin Media. These are a mixture of those who have their own infrastructure (such as BT Openreach), those who act as wholesalers and others who agree bulk purchases for their own retail customers. Virgin Media have their own infrastructure but do not operate within the Cotswold District. The decision by the Government to open up the Openreach infrastructure for other accredited providers to use has seen a number of other players entering the marketplace. Gigaclear via Fastershire has a significant presence in the District and other providers are believed to be looking to supply market towns within the area.
- 2.2. However, good quality broadband would not be provided universally if left to the market alone. Therefore the Government has made available significant funding to speed up the rollout of broadband through Building Digital UK (BDUK), which is part of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. In a Gloucestershire context, this is channelled through the Fastershire project which is a partnership between Gloucestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council.
- 2.3. Broadband technology has moved on over time. Initially copper wires were used, but now fibre optic cables (shortened to 'fibre') which are able to support greater speeds are the norm. When we talk about fibre, this can either be 'fibre to the cabinet' (FTTC - which serves a number of premises and where copper wires are used for the final section of the journey to each individual premises) and 'fibre to the premises' (FTTP - which, as the name suggests, uses fibre optic cables all the way to the property).
- 2.4. As technology has moved on, for example with gaming, streaming of films and more widespread use of video call platforms such as Zoom, greater bandwidth is required. Superfast broadband is defined as download speeds of 30mbps and above. Ultrafast is defined as download speeds of 100mbps and above. Whereas 30mbps would have been sufficient for most purposes in the past, it is now seen as less than ideal for households with multiple users. Installation of broadband is currently focused on being 'Gigabit capable'. A gigabit is the fastest and most reliable available broadband speed and is the same as 1,000 megabits per second (Mbps). Gigabit-capable means that the connection can handle speeds



- 2.5. of 1,000 Mbps but users only sign up to speeds they can afford. As demand increases, users can choose the option to pay for more speed as required.
- 2.6. It is worth noting that advertised internet speeds are not always consistent with what consumers experience for a variety of reasons. The use of wi-fi, although convenient, is not a direct internet connection and in itself leads to a loss of speed. The use of multiple devices within a premises, including tablets and mobile phones, can all have an impact on bandwidth particularly when applications like video conferencing and streaming are used.
- 2.7. The Government has introduced, from March 2020, a Universal Service Obligation (USO) whereby households and businesses are able to request an improved connection if they have a download speed of less than 10mbps or an upload speed of less than 1mbps if they will not be covered by a public broadband scheme in the next 12 months. If the cost of their share of the network is less than £3400 they won't have to pay and if it is more than that they need to pay the excess costs above £3400.

Fastershire Community Broadband Grant

- 2.8. The Fastershire Community Broadband Grant is targeting the final 3-4% of properties in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire that still require access to a superfast broadband of 30mbps or more.

The scheme is entirely funded by Herefordshire Council and Gloucestershire County Council and designed to help find a solution specific for each community. Fastershire will fund up to a maximum of £500,000 per community project.

The purpose of the grant is to provide these properties with access to superfast connection (30mbps or above), but the scheme will only invest in networks that are capable of providing access to gigabit connections (1,000mbps) so community projects that are successful will have access to Fibre to the Property. <https://www.fastershire.com/about-fastershire/community-broadband-grant>.

In some cases, the solution may mean using a new supplier or different technology to reach a deeply rural community, or to extend an existing network further to reach outlying properties that were too expensive to connect in previously.

Any property in the Cotswold District either residential or business can benefit from the grant provided that it:

- Is listed in Fastershire address data
- Cannot access a superfast connection (30mbps or above)
- Is not included in a planned commercial rollout by a network provider
- Is not included in one of Fastershire's on-going rollout contracts with Openreach, Gigaclear or Airband.
- Has not already benefited from a Fastershire grant

Properties at Draycot and Northwick Park have already benefited from the grant and Fastershire are looking to identify others within the District who would qualify. There is a



role for councillors as community leaders to raise awareness of the scheme and encourage eligible communities to come forward.

- 2.9. Progress has been made with delivery of broadband across the District in recent years. According to the Think Broadband website, the District has coverage of 97% of superfast broadband and almost 46% of ultrafast broadband. It is also worth noting that of the 45.8% of ultrafast broadband, 45.5% is delivered by full fibre, compared with just 25.2% nationally. Other comparable local rural districts have coverage as follows:

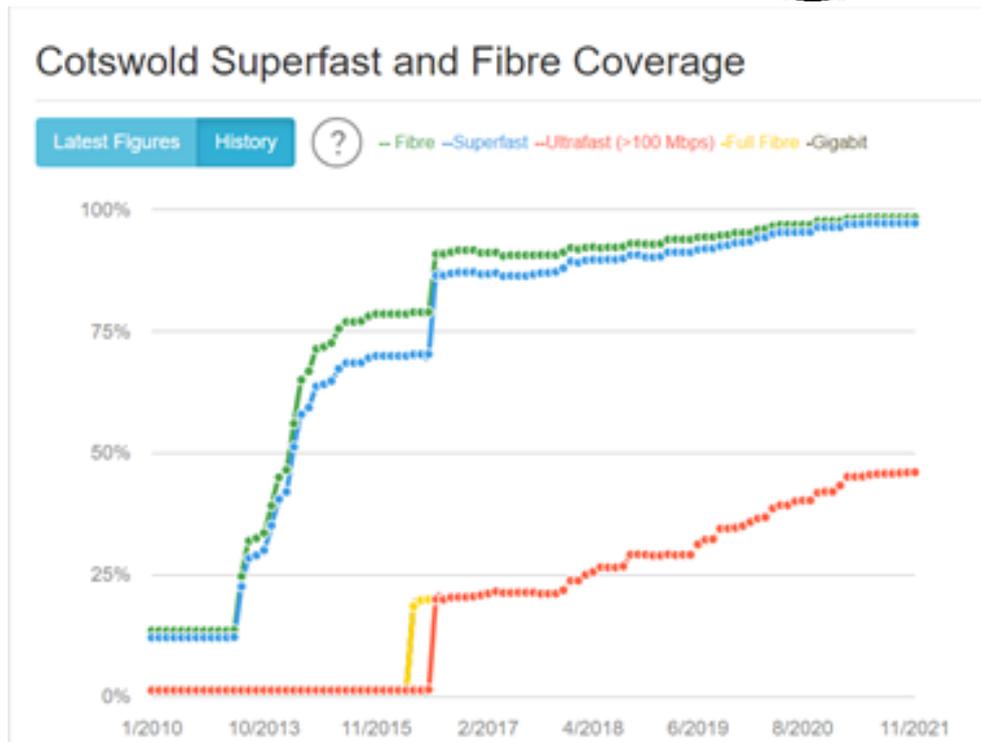
Table I

District	Superfast (%)	Ultrafast (%)
UK Average	96.9	67.3
Cotswold	97.2	45.8
Forest of Dean	86.8	34.1
Stroud	94.8	25
Tewkesbury	98.3	67.3
West Oxfordshire	99	73

Source: Think Broadband website

The image below shows how coverage has improved dramatically in the District over the last decade. The merging of the red and yellow lines from 2015 onwards shows that the expansion of ultrafast broadband (100mbps and over) has been delivered with full fibre connections, which is not the case everywhere.

Image 1



Source :Think Broadband website

- 2.10. At its budget meeting in February 2016, the Council allocated £500k in its Capital Budget for the provision of broadband in the District. Initially this was intended to support further phases of the Fastershire roll out but this became unnecessary due to additional phases being added by Fastershire themselves. As of today, none of this budget has been used. This is, perhaps, not surprising given that the sensible strategy is to allow the maximum coverage to be delivered commercially and with Fastershire/BDUK funding before stepping in with District Council funding. £500k as a commitment from the Council's budget is a sizeable sum, but in terms of broadband delivery it is relatively small and needs to be used wisely. To put it into context, over £65 million of funding has been supplied by BDUK to Fastershire to date. In addition, there are considerations around State Aid and Best Value which have to be taken into account in this heavily-regulated environment. Officers are in discussions with Fastershire to devise a top up to their Community Broadband Grant Scheme to assist those communities where viability is an issue. A report will be brought to Cabinet setting out the details for approval. In the meantime, any requests for drawdown from the capital allocation will be subject to a business case being brought to Cabinet/Council for approval as necessary.
- 2.11. Gigaclear are currently on-site in Cirencester, delivering gigabit-capable broadband, and in Westonbirt. They are currently finalising their build schedule to complete outstanding areas in Cirencester. Once complete their network of live connections in the town will have increased from 1500 to 3500. They have highlighted the offer of a free connection within the build area for a Community Hub, such as a community centre or school, details of which can be found at www.gigaclear.com/community-hub.



- 2.12. Openreach are due to start upgrading their exchanges in the town in 2022 in order to make Cirencester a full fibre town. In addition, Openreach have recently pledged to deliver full fibre to a number of settlements in the District (Tetbury, Northleach, South Cerney, Bourton-on-the-Water, Fairford and Lechlade) by 2026. The exact timing and extent of their rollout is not known and it would be sensible to leave the allocation of £500k in place until it is clear whether there are any areas not covered by the rollout which will need public subsidy. Officers are in regular contact with both Gigaclear and Openreach, offering assistance where needed and encouraging them to complete their rollout as quickly as possible.
- 2.13. In May 2019, the Chancellor announced a £5 billion commitment to fund gigabit-capable broadband for the hardest to reach 20% of homes and businesses and in the Spending Review in November 2020 the budgetary phasing of the programme was confirmed. In December 2020, BDUK launched the [‘Planning for Gigabit in 2021’](#) consultation with communications network providers and local authorities followed by the [Project Gigabit Phase One Delivery Plan](#) in March 2021. An announcement on ‘procurement areas’ has been made by the Government in recent months, with Gloucestershire being in the third phase. It is likely that other routes will deliver improvements more quickly than through this plan.
- 2.14. The Government has made available £210 million for eligible rural areas to get Gigabit capable speeds. The Gigabit Broadband Voucher scheme offers up to £1500 per home or £3500 per business towards the cost of installation. In addition, there is £110 million available to connect public sector buildings like GP surgeries, libraries and schools in hard to reach areas.
- 2.15. Many authorities are now using planning policy to insist on the delivery of good quality broadband to new developments. The Cotswold District Local Plan adopted in 2018 makes reference to broadband in paragraph 11.9.4 but does not include a specific policy requiring the provision of broadband. It is recognised that this is seen by many homebuyers as a prerequisite of a purchase and will therefore be delivered by the market, but it is nonetheless something which could be encouraged or even required by a planning condition. This can be picked up by the current review of the Local Plan.
- 2.16. Mobile phone signal is a slightly separate but connected topic in terms of connectivity. There are areas of the District where coverage is poor. Officers are in regular contact with the main operators to encourage them to improve the position where needed. For example, BT have recently upgraded their mast near Fairford which should improve signal around that area. It is recognised that there is still some way to go to achieve universal coverage. It should also be noted that fibre is also needed for the rollout of 5G mobile coverage.



3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. £500k was allocated in the 2016/17 Capital Budget for delivery of broadband across the District. That allocation remains in place and can be drawn down subject to specific business case approvals.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1. There is a reputational risk to the Council if the capital allocation remains unspent for a long period of time. Equally there is a reputational risk if the money is not seen to be spent wisely. These risks are mitigated by requiring approval of individual business cases to enable drawdown of any funding.

6. EQUALITIES IMPACT (IF REQUIRED)

- 6.1. The Council's Corporate Plan objective is to ensure the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are available to everyone in the District. The rollout of good quality broadband is an important element in the delivery of that objective.

7. ECOLOGICAL AND CLIMATE EMERGENCY IMPLICATIONS (IF REQUIRED)

- 7.1. Good quality broadband enables residents to access services digitally and work from home effectively and in doing so reduces the need for travel, which has a positive effect on emissions.

8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 8.1. The Council could choose to reallocate some or all of the £500k capital budget for broadband provision. This is not recommended as it could result in good quality broadband not being available in some areas of the District which would otherwise have access to it.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 9.1. None

(END)