

# REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMY, TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT

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The Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee met on 15 March 2017.

Present: Councillors Richard Stogdon (Chair), Mike Pursglove (Vice-Chair), Pat Rodohan, Judy Roger, Rosalyn St. Pierre and Barry Taylor.

Also present: Councillors Chris Dowling (Lead Member for Community Services), Carl Maynard (Lead Member for Transport & Environment), and Rupert Simmons (Lead Member for Economic Development)

## 1. Scrutiny Review of Superfast Broadband

1.1 The Economy, Transport and Environment (ETE) Scrutiny Committee has completed its Scrutiny Review of Superfast Broadband. A copy of the Committee's full report is attached as Appendix 1 and has been circulated to all Members.

1.2 In 2012, Cabinet agreed a Broadband Plan to invest £15m from the Council's capital programme (alongside £10.64m of funding from Broadband Delivery UK and £4.4m from British Telecom) to provide the infrastructure necessary to enable access to superfast broadband across the County.

1.3 A three year contract was signed with BT Group in May 2013 to deliver this infrastructure (Contract 1), with a target of providing access to 90% of premises. A second contract was signed with British Telecom (BT) Group in June 2015 to extend superfast broadband coverage to a further 7,000 premises (Contract 2) to reach the target of access to 95% of premises.

1.4 East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Councillors raised a number of residents' and businesses' concerns about the delivery of these contracts with the Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee, namely:

- Broadband speeds have not improved for some residents and small businesses, despite being connected to the new superfast, fibre enabled infrastructure;
- Broadband speeds are slow at peak times of demand;
- Coverage has not reached all residents and premises and some have been left with slow or no broadband;
- Provision of information concerning the timing and availability of superfast broadband has been poor, and precise information about when or whether superfast broadband will be provided to particular premises is not available.

1.5 The Scrutiny Review examined what has been delivered so far under Contract 1 with BT Group, and whether the roll out of Contract 2 will address residents' concerns about broadband speeds and coverage. It also looked at the future provision planned under the Broadband Project, whether residents' expectations of the project were realistic, and the project communication.

1.6 The Review found that:

1.6.1 Broadband Speeds

- There is evidence that some residents and businesses are not aware of improved broadband access in their areas, or the need to change broadband package in order to get faster broadband speeds.
- Users need to choose their Internet Service Provider (ISP) carefully and subscribe to the right package in order to achieve the speeds and performance that they require.

1.6.2 Broadband Coverage

- The delivery of first contract (Contract 1) has achieved and exceeded its objectives in terms of coverage and the number of premises enabled to receive superfast broadband. However, there were a number of areas in the County at the end of Contract 1 that did not have access to superfast broadband.
- The Broadband Team is tackling slower broadband speeds due to long lengths of cabling, and is providing solutions for those affected as well as increasing coverage through the roll out of the second contract (Contract 2).
- It has not been possible to provide superfast broadband to some of the hardest to reach premises, and a third contract (Contract 3) is planned to get to as close to 100% coverage as possible.

1.6.3 Provision for those without Superfast Broadband

- In order to address the issue of fairness and equality of access, some match funding may be required for community based solutions for those premises that will not be covered by the Broadband Project.
- Officers are hopeful that this will not be necessary, but ESCC funding could be provided by using some of the Gainshare income from Contracts 1 and 2.

1.6.4 Residents' Expectations and Project Communications

- The Review concluded that there have been a number of misunderstandings and misconceptions about the purpose of the Broadband Project, which have contributed to unrealistic expectations by the public of what the Project can deliver.
- There is a need to undertake an additional phase of communication activity now that first contract of the project has been completed. ESCC needs to communicate clearly that:
  - the Project is still ongoing with details of what is being done and when;
  - the Project may not provide superfast broadband access for all premises with the funding it has available;
  - there are options available to get better broadband for those who may find themselves without superfast services once the Project is completed; and
  - there are other factors that affect broadband speed, beyond the control of the Project.

1.7 The Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee **recommends** to the County Council –

1.7.1 Further steps are taken to:

- a. Communicate when faster speeds are available as the project rollout continues;
- b. Provide additional advice to residents and businesses about checking speeds, selecting an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and information on other factors that affect broadband speeds; and
- c. Make it easier for residents and businesses to check for themselves the broadband coverage and the speed they can receive.

1.7.2 Details of coverage, including maps, are published at the end of Contract 2 and further information is provided to explain how and why finite funding levels may prevent the project from enabling superfast broadband access for some harder to reach premises.

1.7.3 Information is provided at the earliest opportunity outlining those premises that may not be ‘connected’ to superfast broadband and that the survey results are made available to communities and smaller suppliers to encourage the development of alternative delivery methods.

1.7.4 Once the total cost of providing superfast broadband to the remaining premises is known (or can be estimated), the Broadband Team clarifies how those premises receiving the slowest speeds will be prioritised in the context of the remaining available budget.

1.7.5 When, and if necessary, a ‘community match’ type funding programme is established for communities to bid into to pay for community based broadband schemes, in order to provide access for some of the hardest to reach premises not covered by the project, and a ‘toolkit’ is developed for communities who wish to implement their own broadband schemes.

1.7.6 Councillors, business organisations, and Parish Councils are encouraged to contact the Broadband Team with details of any Business Parks that do not have access to superfast broadband, so they can be included in the project rollout.

1.7.7 Lessons are learnt about the management of expectations when embarking upon complex projects of this nature, and to avoid “hype” at the outset, so that there is a careful distinction between aspirations or vision statements and the actual projected outcomes.

1.7.8 A phased communication plan is developed to address the expectations of residents and businesses in the County regarding the Broadband Project and recommendations 1, 2 and 3 of the review. The plan should include enhancement of information available, including:

- a. A revision of the web site design and information so that project rollout information, frequently asked questions, and other project information is provided more clearly on the Go East Sussex, e-Sussex and ESCC web sites;

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- b. An information pack (including information sources to check speeds, ISP service offers and availability etc.) produced to assist ESCC Councillors, Parish Councils and Community Leaders when dealing with broadband issues in their Division or area; and
- c. A fact sheet created to address misconceptions about the Broadband Project and some of the frequently asked questions.

[See also Report of the Cabinet – 6 June 2017]

15 MARCH 2017

RICHARD STOGDON  
Chair