

Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) Broadband Delivery Programme

Lead Officer: Michele Cusack
Author: Katriona Lovelock
Contact Details: 07977 401 921 / KLovelock@somerset.gov.uk
Cabinet Member: Cllr David Hall
Division and Local Member: All

1. Summary

- 1.1. CDS is a local government-led partnership which is working to extend superfast broadband infrastructure in areas where commercial providers do not plan to deliver a Next Generation Access (NGA) broadband service. Next Generation Access (NGA) broadband service is a service capable of delivering download speeds of at least 30Mbps.
- 1.2. Somerset County Council is the Accountable Body for the CDS partnership.

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. This report provides an update on the progress of the CDS programme.

3. Update

- 3.1. To date more than 300,000 homes and businesses across Devon and Somerset can access superfast broadband, with a further 38,000 having access to improved broadband. Every month hundreds more homes and businesses are being connected due to the Connecting Devon and Somerset programme (CDS). Take up of Phase 1 Openreach broadband services is nearly 60%. This level of take up is above the national average.
- 3.2. In Phase 2 Airband Community Internet has completed the build of its fixed wireless access network in the National Parks which covers more than 5,000 premises in some of the most challenging geography in the region. Further Phase 2 network build continues in Lot 4 where Airband is delivering superfast coverage in Northern Devon. A total of 7,369 premises have been covered in lot 4 and build continues. CDS and Airband are exploring options to include some fibre delivery in the current contracts.
- 3.3. Previous reports to scrutiny have confirmed that Gigaclear's build in lots 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 has fallen behind significantly behind schedule. Gigaclear was placed on notice of default as a result of the delays. CDS allowed the company additional time to evaluate and cost alternative methods of network construction. The company was required to provide a revised plan which is acceptable to both CDS and the Government.

- 3.4. Gigaclear submitted revised plans to provide full-fibre superfast broadband coverage at the end of July and presented these at a meeting in August. CDS and the Government's Building Digital UK (BDUK) agency has been analysing the proposals in detail to see whether they can form an acceptable and credible recovery plan. The conclusions of this process are expected to be reported shortly and CDS has confirmed that it will not shrink from taking further tough action if that is deemed necessary.

4. Ongoing Broadband Delivery

- 4.1. As previously reported the programme has joined the **Better Broadband Voucher Scheme**. This will benefit residents and businesses with speed of less than 2 Mbps which are not part of planned deployment from another publicly funded scheme within the next 12 months. Residents or businesses can request a voucher and a registered provider can be selected to provide a new service including 4G wireless and satellite solutions. Homes or businesses which benefit from the scheme will not have their status in any future superfast broadband roll-out affected. Details can be found at the following site.

<https://basicbroadband.culture.gov.uk/>

- 4.2. **The Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme** is also available providing businesses and residential properties with vouchers. Businesses can claim up to £2,500 either individually or as part of a group project and residents can claim a voucher of up to £500 as part of a group project. Details can be found at the following site.

<https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/>

- 4.3. **Community Challenge Fund**. CDS has piloted a Community Challenge Fund in three communities across the region. The Community Challenge Fund Scheme enables local communities to select an approved private sector partner and co-produce a broadband solution that works best for them with some financial support and advice from CDS.

Pilots have been successfully trialled in Harford and Lower Combe in Devon with Openreach and Airband, and a third is underway in Yatton in North Somerset with Openreach. In total 138 homes and businesses will have access to full fibre to the premise broadband with the capability to deliver speeds up to 1 Gbps. The pilots have been supported by £70,000 capital funding from CDS.

The pilots have proved effective at enabling local people in communities with different needs to co-produce a broadband solution that works best for them with CDS support. Each community has had different characteristics and challenges, ranging from deeply rural areas and protected landscapes to urban fringes.

CDS is proposing to apply the good practice learned from these pilots to help other communities to develop their own solutions, and subject to funding

availability, where there is good buy-in from the community and cost-effective options proposed, CDS can offer some capital funding support. This is under development and adds a new dimension to complement the CDS broader programme. It also supports the Government's full fibre policy. Further details, including advice to communities and how to apply for financial support will be announced in due course.

Further information about the pilots can be found at the following link:

<https://www.connectingdevonandsomerset.co.uk/cds-set-to-expand-community-broadband-scheme-after-successful-pilots/>

4.4. Market Engagement

Over the summer CDS has launched an Open Market Review to identify the plans of commercial operators to deliver superfast and gigabit broadband services. CDS has also invited providers to a series of meetings to explore opportunities to extend broadband coverage. This process is ongoing.

The purpose of the market engagement is to test and explore approaches and options with providers to serve those premises which do not yet have a 30 Mbps broadband service. CDS investigates commercial providers' appetite and capacity to build in the region. CDS is also taking the opportunity to prudently examine potential alternatives for some of the current Phase 2 programme areas under contract with Gigaclear, some 47,000 premises, predominantly in rural areas should that need arise.

A range of options will be considered including but not limited to

- potential further procurement of solutions to apply additional public subsidy,
- community-led solutions, taking forward the community challenge fund pilots,
- stimulating demand leading to commercial investments
- opportunities to connecting public buildings to act as hubs for their wider communities and
- all types of appropriate commercial models.

5. Future Broadband Strategy

- 5.1.** CDS continues to work with stakeholders including BDUK and the LEP to develop a Digital Strategy for the Heart of the South West which will include connectivity and infrastructure as well as considering digital skills and innovation. This will help to guide the approach for extending coverage and investing further funding.