

Wiltshire Council

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

8 July 2014

Scrutiny Report on Broadband from Cllr George Jeans

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How and what Wiltshire Council communicate to its residents and members has been challenging. It is a complex and fluid infrastructure build over a number of years. Residents are used to getting full and detailed information about other council services and have felt that the Superfast Broadband roll out is not transparent enough.

The team fully understand the needs of residents and members and has had to balance them with the level of information that is felt to be Commercially Sensitive and the complexity of the roll out. The technology we deploy and the timeline is very dependent on the results from the on the ground surveying. We are steadily working through the surveying but we cannot survey every premise in every area at the same time and the surveying process will continue across the life of the deployment delaying a clear message to some homes scheduled later in the programme.

We have been constantly reviewing our communications approach and working through opportunities with both BT and BDUK (Government Broadband Delivery project).

In May we launched a postcode checker on our website which coincided with a big announcement detailing the homes and business that can order a Superfast service. Following the announcement we will see the number of homes that can order a new service steadily rising so we will be regularly updating our website and sending information to the relevant Parish Councils and Area Boards.

GWB Programme

The GWB programme is split into several phases and milestones. The Wiltshire project has 8 geographical phases. Each phase has four milestones within it, as follows:

- Milestone 0 – Planning and surveying (planning the network, surveying underground ducts and planning where the new fibre street cabinets and over-ground equipment will go).
- Milestone 1 – Network build (Installing equipment in the Exchanges, building the fibre spine network, installing the new cabinets, connecting the power supply).
- Milestone 2 – Ready for service
- Milestone 3 – Customer take up

At the completion of milestones 0, 1 and 2, BT is able to claim for the work undertaken to complete the milestone. BDUK has developed an assurance process called Milestone To Cash which the councils should use in order to validate the claim. This Milestone to Cash process sets out the assurance process that the councils should follow in order to pay the milestone claims from BT.

Wiltshire Council has completed the Milestone to Cash assurance process for Phase 1 Milestone 0 and made their first payment to BT in March.

The team are confident with the process and attend the regular training sessions hosted by BDUK. The team have involved South West Audit from the beginning of the process and we met with them again in April to provide an update. The team are now working on the second Milestone to Cash claim with funds due to be paid to BT end of June.

Superfast Extension Programme

The contract with British Telecom is to deliver 24Mbps + service to as many homes and businesses in Wiltshire with the funds available and the roll out has been designed accordingly. Central Government has acknowledged though investment in superfast broadband across the country has been significant, it has not been able to provide 100% coverage in most local authority areas and it has made further funds available as part of the Superfast Extension Programme (SEP).

In September 2013 central government announced the Superfast Extension Programme (SEP) an additional 250 million pounds to extend the superfast broadband coverage by 2017. The Superfast Broadband Extension indicative funding allocation (£m) for Wiltshire, South Gloucestershire and Swindon has been confirmed as 4.97.

The Wiltshire Online Programme Board and Wiltshire MPs wrote to BDUK stating that significant 'over match' of funding was provided within the existing programme of work (phase 1) and that this should be taken into account for Phase 2. BDUK have not accepted this argument and stated that any superfast extension funding requires the council to match. Wiltshire Council have yet to identify match funding opportunities.

The current infrastructure is a key factor and the costs of changing the existing copper network is prohibitive in some cases. The aim of the project is to achieve the best possible long-term broadband coverage for Wiltshire with the resources and budget available. All should get a minimum of 2Mb

The following may give you an understanding of some terminology.

FTTC (Fibre to the Cabinet)

Connected to a existing copper cabinet (PCP)

New fibre cabinet (DSLAM)

Roll-out

The roll-out is based on a number of factors including local demographics and geography, planning requirements, the existing engineering infrastructure and the availability of suitable technologies to provide a service. Other designs were considered, for example connecting rural areas first, followed by larger villages and towns but doing so would result in a time-consuming and costly project, and would ultimately reduce the number of premises we are able to deliver superfast broadband to.

According to the media, nationally BT have had some initial problems with too many customers prepared to pay a premium in some areas, the resulting local speed not increasing by that it should. Hopefully this will not affect anywhere in Wiltshire.

With regards to the Area Boards, Wiltshire Online and BT are due to attend every Area Board and the team are working closely with all community area managers to put together a rota that best reflects progress of the rollout across the county.

Cllr George Jeans