

County Councillor's report to Parishes - June 2017

At ESCC Cabinet on 6th June 2017 we discussed the Department of Economy, Transport, and Environment Scrutiny Committee Report on Superfast Broadband.

This scrutiny review developed from a) high public expectations b) councillors regret that only 90% coverage was initially recommended c) the concepts of fairness and equity d) the slowness and poor results of the project, as understood by residents.

However, the Broadband Team at ESCC, headed up by Katy Thomas, was warmly congratulated for all their effort and hard work and achievement.

The ESCC project is one of 44 across the UK.

In 2012 using £15m from ESCC capital funds, in conjunction with Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK), a delivery unit within the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport, and £10m of central government funding, it was resolved to roll out superfast broadband to all of East Sussex. The target was 90% coverage. There have been 3 phases of work. Phase 3 is just starting. Full rollout should be achieved by the end of phase 3 provided there is sufficient funding. ESCC has entered into 2 contracts with BT Group:

Contract 1 (signed in May 2013) to deliver a 3 year programme of infrastructure improvements funded by ESCC £15m, BDUK £10.64m and BT £4.4m.

Contract 2 (signed in June 2015) to deliver an infrastructure programme to provide superfast broadband coverage to a further 5000 premises (recently increased to 7000). This work is taking place in 2016 and 2017, and is funded by ESCC £3m (reinvested from the first contract) BDUK £3m and BT £265,000. When contract 1 was signed the commitment was for 90% coverage. However as Contract 2 progressed 100% coverage became the aspiration.

By 2016 it was realised that there were several problems. Councillors, in particular, disputed the target and said there should be equity, and the target should be 100% coverage. A scrutiny review has been carried out to attempt to iron out the problems.

a) Broadband speeds have not improved for some residents and businesses

b) speeds are slow at peak times of demand

c) coverage has not reached all residents and premises

d) in some cases the provision of information concerning timing and availability of superfast broadband was not available

A flexible approach was adopted by ESCC to enable superfast broadband to reach the greatest number of premises for the least amount of public funding.

Contract 1 with BT was completed on time and exceeded the coverage targets. During Contract 1 the government identified additional funding. This enabled the target to be raised to 95% coverage by

the end of 2017. For East Sussex, under Contract 2, this meant an additional 7000 premises have access to superfast broadband. Besides exceeding coverage targets, Contract 1 also exceeded the take up levels. This resulted in around 40% of connected premises choosing to make use of new services. Additional revenue has been generated for the supplier, and a proportion returned to ESCC as State Aid clawback and Gainshare. This funding is being invested in a third phase of delivery through Contract 3. Through changes in engineering methods and technology, as close to 100% coverage is being sought.

The contracts require the supplier to provide a network infrastructure that is open access and capable of being used by a number of Internet providers (ISP's). The definition of "connected" means users have the facility to get faster broadband speeds, when they are physically connected to the fibre enabled telephone network. However, users need to subscribe to the right package from an ISP to get faster broadband speeds. The actual broadband speed available depends on:

- the type of cabling used to connect to the telephone network and the distance away from the cabinet (FTTC) fibre to the cabinet
- the broadband package the user subscribes to and the capacity of their ISP 's network
- the nature of the equipment they use to connect to the internet ie router, WiFi, internal wiring, age of equipment and the currency of the web browser

FTTC means that a fibre optic cable is used to connect the telephone exchange to the cabinet in the street. Existing telephone wires are used to make the final connection between the cabinet and the user's premises. The phone cable may have joints and junction boxes within it which affect final broadband speed. FTTC is used by BT because it is a way of "connecting" as many premises as possible for the funding available. FTTC delivers a speed uplift to superfast (over 24 Mbps) for at least 80% of "connected" premises. A further 10% will see a further speed uplift but not to superfast. It is unusual for any premises to see a speed reduction. The more rural and widely spaced out properties are, the less likely they will see uplift. Contract 2 includes installing additional cabinets and rearranging phone lines to shorten the length of telephone cable. Contract 3 extends this work.

ISP's do not inform customers when faster broadband becomes available. it is important for residents to check speeds, select an ISP, and obtain information on other factors that affect broadband speeds.

The ESCC website and e-sussex and Go East Sussex, provide a lot of information (put in user's postcode).

Ofcom requires BT Openreach to inform all ISP's at the same time when new services are available. Roll out information is updated at the end of every quarter at postcode level.

There have been obstructions to roll out:

- provision of new power supplies for fibre cabinets
- difficulties in obtaining wayleaves from landowners for new cable routes
- existing ducts and cables being unsuitable for use

- inability to share power supply poles

Coverage was exceeded for Contract 1. Details of coverage, including maps , should be published at the end of Contract 2, also an explanation, if necessary , why finite funding levels may prevent the project reaching far flung premises.

In Contract 3 it is demanded that:

- an estimate is made as to the siting of the estimated residual 20,000 properties
- the nearest network connection point to these
- an estimate of cost for these properties
- communication with premises and businesses in relation to cost and delivery

Any business parks across the county not having "connectivity" should inform the Broadband Team (Katy Thomas) at ESCC or information should be relayed by Councillors, or Parish Councils.

Alternative Technologies

a) Wireless to the Cabinet

b) Satellite - there is a government funded voucher scheme up to £350 to offset the installation cost of satellite broadband

c) Universal Service Obligation (USO)

d) There are also Community Schemes - community match type funding programmes

This report is available on the ESCC website.

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