

BROADBAND ISSUES IN HEREFORDSHIRE**Report By: Senior Economic Regeneration Officer****Wards Affected**

Hollington and Countywide

Purpose

1. To update the Committee on broadband issues in the County.

Financial Implications

2. The Council is not in a position to fund any improvements to broadband provision directly but Advantage West Midlands (AWM) may be able to assist in the provision of a sustainable long-term service where there is clear market failure. This was the basis on which AWM paid to have the last few exchanges in the county enabled for broadband in 2006, and subsidised the Airband wireless broadband service at Rotherwas. However, state aid rules make it difficult for AWM to provide funds directly to BT to improve the infrastructure, and any solution needs to include some form of competitive procurement.

Background

3. The Council is not directly involved with improving broadband provision, but linked to the Herefordshire in Touch (HIT) programme, AWM funded the West Midlands Networking Company (WMNC) to oversee the full provision of broadband across the region. All exchanges in Herefordshire were finally enabled in 2006 following a contract with BT. However, the contract was only to provide 512Kb bandwidth to homes, not necessarily 2Mb or more, as some might hope for. The higher bandwidth is only available for a relatively short distance from the exchange. Both the HIT programme and WMNC have now concluded.
4. Despite the enabling of exchanges there is an ongoing problem about the use of a line-sharing device known as a DACS by BT, which splits lines to more than one user and is incompatible with broadband. This happened to squeeze more lines onto small rural exchanges as the communities grew, and was not specifically covered by the contract with WMNC. However, BT states they will try and move pairs of cables around so that those users who want broadband can get their own pairs, while those who don't may be moved onto the DACS – so first come first served if capacity is limited. However this is not a sustainable long-term solution. There may also be issues with the standard or type of cabling used in some places, as this can also restrict the service that can be supplied.
5. As a result of the issues mentioned above there are many residents and businesses in the County who cannot get a satisfactory service. In some cases they may be within a short range of an exchange, but perhaps because of constraints at the nearer exchange they are linked to one much further away and therefore unable to receive a service. As an alternative to a landline broadband service it is possible to use a cellphone type of service at competitive rates, but this 3G service is only available in a few areas of Herefordshire. However, even where this is available the capacity offered by this service may prove too limiting for a business. The Community Access Point project has provided good broadband access in a number of rural communities, but does not deliver directly into homes and businesses.

6. The Rotherwas Industrial Estate is affected by distance and cable quality issues and as a result the broadband service there is limited to 512Kb bandwidth for most firms, with a few nearer the bridge able to achieve 1Mb. To address this, AWM arranged for a wireless service to be provided in 2003, by a company called Airband, for a contracted period of 2 years. While this had some success, it has never paid for itself and the supplier ended the service on 31st March 2008. This happened sooner than anticipated and the supplier was not willing to extend the close down period.
7. Over the years BT have frequently been asked to improve the service at Rotherwas but have always proved unwilling as the financial returns has been unattractive to them. Alternative services for Rotherwas are being actively explored, as a good broadband service is key to achieving the Rotherwas Futures objectives. One option would be to use some of the Council's infrastructure to provide sufficient data bandwidth into the estate, linked to some form of onward distribution, this option is currently being explored.
8. To progress the broadband issues around the county some sort of survey of residents and businesses may be required, to establish who has experienced problems and what they were. This may be as simple as a request in Herefordshire Matters for people who have experienced problems to get in touch, through to a more rigorous and detailed survey. It may be possible to undertake some theoretical assessment of problems but this has not been explored. A major issue to overcome is the lack of any specific resource to undertake this work. In terms of a solution it is unlikely that it would be economic to improve the existing cable infrastructure sufficiently to meet future demand in rural areas. However, new wireless technologies such as Wi-Max are emerging and may provide a more economic long-term solution in rural areas.

Recommendation

THAT the Committee note the issues being experienced by broadband users in the County

Background Papers

- Herefordshire in Touch Programme Forward Strategy May 2007