

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

Countywide

Purpose

1. To update the Scrutiny 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. 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. Issues with rural broadband availability and the problems at Rotherwas were highlighted to the Scrutiny Committee at its last meeting. Since then there have been public meetings relating to a wireless broadband service in the centre of Hereford and the development of a faster broadband service in and around Ross-on-Wye. The meeting at Ross was followed by a meeting with Ian Binks, BT Regional Manager, Gary Woodman from the Chamber of Commerce and Councillor Blackshaw.
4. Suggestions for a wireless service in Hereford and Ross are being proposed by local organisations as a way of improving footfall in the town centres, and thereby increasing local trade.
5. The meeting with BT provided some background to the problems experienced in rural areas. When the UK telephone network was set up the expectation was that only 50-60% of homes would want a telephone. Currently there is an average of 1.3 phone lines per home, and as a consequence the exchanges are struggling. BT are required to provide a "metal" link to every home that wants one under a "universal telephone provision" act but is not required to provide broadband. However, all new cabling is being installed with a bigger gauge of copper wire to enable a good quality broadband service to be provided, other factors permitting.
6. The upgrade of BT exchanges that is now taking place will result in all exchanges moving to a digital basis, giving them greater capacity. For end users the benefits should be a possible doubling of available bandwidth, but the reach of broadband will not be significantly affected so those currently without it may not be helped. The Hereford exchange is due for upgrade in August this year. Part of the upgrade programme, known as 21st Century Network, will involve removing DACS devices and line concentrators which are currently preventing some homes from being connected, so there may be some benefits for residents.
7. The attached map produced by the Research Team, based on post code queries to BT's broadband checker website, shows the grey areas where broadband connection is unlikely. (colour copies of the map will be available at the meeting). This was discussed with BT's Ian Binks and it was apparent that BT have identified their own list of "not spots" where there is no connection to broadband, and that they have a programme to address these. However, this

programme is prioritised on the numbers of residents affected and cost of resolution, and we do not know how many “not spots” are in Herefordshire, or their priority. Ian Binks agreed to check on providing this information to the Council, although he believed there might be some confidentiality issues. Given the high cost of replacing infrastructure he felt that some other technology, such as wireless, might prove to be a cheaper solution to problems in rural areas.

8. 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. A wireless broadband service on the estate, providing a higher bandwidth service, ended on 31st March 2008. As a result businesses have had to “bond” lines or take leased lines, to give them the capacity they require. This issue has been discussed with BT, most recently in May, but it is unlikely BT will take steps to improve broadband there.
9. Alternative services for Rotherwas are being actively explored, including the use of the Council’s infrastructure to provide sufficient data bandwidth into the estate. Discussions are ongoing on this approach, and with other private sector companies, with a wireless service being the most likely solution for distribution on the estate. The chosen solution should provide a resilient, competitively priced, high capacity broadband service to all companies on the estate. New infrastructure introduced as part of Rotherwas Futures will include the necessary trunking to allow a wired or fibre service to new buildings when the opportunity arises.
10. To progress the broadband issues around the county a survey of residents and businesses is being considered for the September issue of Herefordshire Matters. This should establish who has experienced problems and what they were, and help us to take forward the issue with BT. In parallel with this the whole telecommunications industry is continuing to develop, and it is expected that mobile phone companies may become actively involved in providing higher capacity broadband services. The radio frequencies that can be used to provide a high quality wireless broadband service are also due to be auctioned this autumn, and this may also result in new products becoming available. As a result the next few years may see the emergence of more alternative solutions for broadband in rural areas.

Recommendation

THAT the report is noted.

Background Papers

Herefordshire in Touch Programme Forward Strategy May 2007