

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>Broadband Provision</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 September 2021
<b>WARD</b>	None specific;
<b>LEAD OFFICER</b>	Director, Place and Growth - Steve Moore

## OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Members of the Committee will have a greater understanding of the work underway and planned to secure access to high quality, high speed broadband for residents, businesses and communities across Wokingham Borough.

In turn this will help promote and communicate plans and aspirations more effectively across the Borough to other stakeholders.

## RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee

- 1) notes the content of the report (and related presentation);
- 2) endorses the work of the Berkshire Digital Infrastructure Group (DIG) in seeking to expedite provision of digital infrastructure across Berkshire;
- 3) constructively considers how Wokingham Borough Council can best contribute to the successful delivery of high-speed broadband in the Borough and maximise accessibility for all residents.

## SUMMARY OF REPORT

This short report and the related presentation have been prepared in response to a request from the Community & Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee for an item regarding: "What is being done to ensure that every resident has the best access to high-speed broadband".

The report and presentation:

- **Provides some context for the delivery of broadband infrastructure nationally and locally.** The vast majority of business and residential properties will be provided for by the commercial offer of the main providers but a proportion will not be viable without subsidy, including in Wokingham Borough with its widespread rural communities. The need for public intervention to address this disparity has long been recognised by government and continues to be an integral component of policy to meet the needs of the estimated 20% of premises nationally that are not commercially viable.
- **Describes the current position with regard to the existing Superfast Berkshire Broadband project** that is currently being delivered and due to be

completed by April 2022. This project will give broadband coverage with speeds of over 24 Mbps to 98.64% of households in the Borough.

- **Outlines the emergence of the DIG** and the development of an associated Berkshire Digital Strategy. In the context of technological advances ‘Superfast’ as previously defined will clearly not meet current or future needs and aspirations, with ‘Full Fibre’ connections being the most appropriate way of future-proofing digital infrastructure and guaranteeing high speeds and capability. The strategy sets an explicit target to increase full-fibre coverage in Berkshire to 95% by the end of 2025 from the current baseline of 13.86%. Achievement of this target will require actions to try and ensure that both commercial and subsidised provision is expedited and that investment in Berkshire’s digital infrastructure doesn’t lag behind other parts of the country.
- **Looks at emergent national initiatives** that have relevance to the Borough, including most notably the recently announced ‘Gigabit’ government initiative, a £5b project that is being led by Building Digital UK (BDUK). This is the government’s key initiative to deliver gigabit connectivity for everyone in the UK, targeting the estimated 20% of premises that require subsidy. Delivery is via a national centralised procurement process and Wokingham Borough is included in Phase 2 of the implementation plan with procurement commencing in May 2022 and an anticipated start date of April 2023.

## Background

Digital infrastructure and in particular ultrafast broadband are increasingly being seen as essential utilities for modern day life and critical for the future of the economy. The pandemic has heightened the awareness of the significance of digital connectivity and home-based access to high-speed broadband to facilitate high productivity whilst working remotely. The vast majority of businesses and residential premises, nationally and locally, will be provided for by the mainstream commercial operations of the major providers. However, there will be a proportion of primarily rural and/or remote communities where commercial provision is not viable. At a national level the Government estimates that 80% of premises will be commercially viable but a residual 20% will require some form of subsidy. These proportions will vary in different parts of the country with more urbanised areas being more attractive to the market for commercial provision and those that have a higher proportion of rural / remote areas (such as Cumbria or Cornwall) requiring greater levels of subsidy. This plays out locally in Berkshire with West Berkshire and Wokingham (in particular) having greater proportions of ‘non-viable’ premises than Slough or Reading, for example.

The need for public intervention to address this disparity has long been recognised. The Superfast Berkshire Broadband project was initiated in 2011 with the involvement of all 6 Berkshire unitary authorities and the LEP and funding from Government (the history of this programme is summarised within the link contained within the background papers section of this report. In June 2016, Superfast Berkshire embarked on Phase 3 which incorporated a significant focus on Wokingham Borough, one contract was awarded to BT anticipating an increase of 11,147 connected properties in Berkshire towns and another contract has been awarded to Gigaclear anticipating an increase of 11,447 connected properties in the Berkshire countryside. On completion it is

anticipated that the Superfast Berkshire project will provide broadband access with speeds of over 24 Mbps to 98.64% of households in the Borough.

In this context it should be noted that for both commercial and subsidised digital infrastructure, providers need substantial geographical coverage that goes beyond individual local authority boundaries to be cost-effective, providing both economies of scale for implementation and a significant potential customer base.

Following initial delays and set-backs Phase 3 is now well underway and due for completion by April 2022. The current position for Wokingham Borough is as follows:

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Target No.s</b>	<b>Ready for Service</b>	<b>To be Completed</b>
Openreach Superfast	756	617	139
Gigaclear Superfast	3,118	1,696	1,422
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,874</b>	<b>2,313</b>	<b>1,561</b>

### **Analysis of Issues**

Of course, particularly in the world of digital, technology moves on and it is now 10 years since the origin of the Superfast Berkshire Project and 5 years since the commencement of phase 3. The original definition of 'superfast' is therefore nowadays something of a misnomer and the following definition of speeds may be helpful in the context of future needs and aspirations:

Superfast = speeds of over 24Mbps

Ultrafast = Speeds of over 100Mbps

Full Fibre = FTTH or FTTP (fibre to the house or premises) speeds of 1Gbps

Gigabit = Capable of speeds of 1Gbps using FTTH/FTTP or DOCSIS 3.1 (Virgin Cable)

'Superfast' as previously defined will clearly not meet current or future needs and aspirations, with 'Full Fibre' being the most appropriate way of future-proofing digital infrastructure and guaranteeing high speeds and capability. In recognition of this the former Superfast Berkshire Project Steering Group has evolved into the Berkshire Digital Infrastructure Group with officer representation from each of the Berkshire unitary authorities and from the LEP and Chaired by one of the local authority Chief Executives (currently Tim Wheadon from Bracknell Forest). The establishment of the DIG has been endorsed by all the Berkshire Chief Executives and all the partners have agreed a contribution of £16k to increase the capacity of the Superfast Berkshire Project Office to progress initiatives to ensure delivery of next generation digital infrastructure.

The DIG has now developed a 'Connected Berkshire' Vision and strategy which in relation to Broadband is intended to both:

- Ensure that Berkshire receives an adequate share of government subsidy to address the needs of rural communities; and
- That Berkshire is attractive for commercial investment sooner rather than later in a national context of limited delivery capacity from the main providers.

The Vision / Strategy seeks to:

- Increase full-fibre coverage to 95% by the end of 2025 from the current baseline of 13.86% (accepting that a small proportion of premises will not be economically viable for full fibre connections).
- Eliminate 4G 'not-spots' by the end of 2022.
- Establish a 5G testbed and small cell rollout by 2023.
- Eliminate digital poverty.

With regard to subsidised provision the government has recently made more announcements regarding 'Project Gigabit' the government's national mission to deliver lightning-fast, reliable broadband to everyone in the UK. To be delivered under the auspices of BDUK the country has been divided onto regional 'lots' that will be procured from the market on a competitive basis. Wokingham is included in Lot 26 that covers Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and East Berkshire. This will form part of Phase 2 of the national exercise with the procurement commencing in May 2022 and an anticipated start date of April 2023. Further details of the national programme can be found in the Government's recent update via the link contained within the background papers section of this report.

As part of 'Project Gigabit' the Government is also providing up to £210m of voucher funding as immediate help for people experiencing slow broadband speeds in rural areas. Vouchers worth up to £1,500 for homes and £3,500 for businesses are available to help cover the costs of installing gigabit broadband. Further details on the voucher scheme can be found in the link contained within the background papers section of this report.

As outlined above, the majority of premises will be provided with full-fibre connectivity through the commercial operations of the main providers. For example, we know that both Openreach and City Fibre have extensive local investment plans that cover large parts of Wokingham Borough. In addition, it is worth noting that Gigaclear's investment under the current Superfast Berkshire project is for a full fibre to the premises solution that will provide gigabit capability.

In this arena the ongoing work of DIG is directed towards making Berkshire an attractive location for investment by removing barriers and ensuring a consistent approach across the area to encourage providers to expedite infrastructure provision. The key premise being that unless Berkshire can create favourable conditions for the market to invest in fibre infrastructure there is a risk they'll focus their attentions and limited capacity elsewhere. A series of linked work streams are currently being pursued to meet this objective and DIG has already led on a successful bid to MCHLG's 'Getting Building Fund', securing £1.4m to provide gigabit capable full-fibre connections to a number of rural schools across Berkshire, including in Wokingham Borough.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

*The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.*

	How much will it Cost	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£16k	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A

### Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

All the DIG partners (6 LAs and the LEP) have agreed to contribute £16k to support the work of DIG. This budget of £112k will be managed by DIG to commission work to deliver the vision / strategy.

### Cross-Council Implications

The work to encourage investment in and effective delivery of digital infrastructure will involve a range of Council services and functions including planning, highways, assets, legal and economic development. In broader terms the advent of gigabit capable broadband is likely to impact how residents and businesses utilise new technology in their daily lives and in turn how the Council delivers services to meet their needs.

### Public Sector Equality Duty

This report provides an overview of the work underway and planned across Berkshire to secure access to high quality, high speed broadband for residents, businesses and communities across Wokingham Borough. It is not considered that an equalities impact assessment is required in this context.

### Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

N/A

### List of Background Papers

[Programme History](#)  
[Project Gigabit Delivery Plan - Summer Update - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).  
[Gigabit Vouchers \(culture.gov.uk\)](#).

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