Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee

10:00 Tuesday, 28th November 2023

Digital Connectivity – Old Town

Executive/routine
Wards

1.   Recommendations

1.1   It is recommended that the Committee notes the work underway to improve both broadband connectivity.

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Report

Digital Connectivity – Old Town

2.   Executive Summary

2.1   The purpose of this report is to provide an update to members on the broadband connectivity in the Council area.

3.   Background

3.1   City of Edinburgh Council has Full Fibre or Fibre to the Premise (FTTP) broadband connectivity to almost 80% of premises from a number of providers and 98% of the premises are capable of receiving 'superfast broadband', which is defined as speed of at least 24Mbps.

3.2   This does mean, however, that just under 2% of properties across the Council area do not have access to superfast broadband.

3.3   This report provides background to the work underway to improve connectivity to all premises, but most particularly, to the premises with no access to superfast broadband.

4.   Main report

Universal Service Obligation (USO)

4.1   In 2018, the UK Government introduced The Electronic Communications (Universal Service) (Broadband) Order 2018 which came into force in March 2020.

4.2   The USO allows eligible addresses to request a 'decent' broadband connection. Ofcom defines this as a connection that can deliver a download speed of at least 10Mb and an upload speed of at least 1Mb.

Withdrawal of WeLink

4.3   WeLink provided fixed wireless access (FWA) to homes in a number of locations in Edinburgh which were otherwise not able to access superfast broadband, launching the service in summer 2021.

4.4   FWA enables fixed broadband to premises which is delivered by radio frequencies rather than cables which simplified the delivery of connectivity to some of our harder to cable premises.

4.5   In July 2023, WeLink advised that they were withdrawing from the UK ISP (Internet Service Provider) market as a result of 'commercial, financial and technical issues'. This has left customers of the service in Edinburgh seeking alternative providers which, in most cases, do not deliver the speeds they had from the WeLink offering.

UK and Scottish Government Broadband Commitments

4.6   Both UK and Scottish Governments actively support the rollout of superfast broadband and, in particular, of Full Fibre FTTP.

4.7   The UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has supported a number of initiatives for Full Fibre Rollout over the last few years and is currently consulting on the USO, with specific focus on harder to reach premises and how connectivity can be delivered in more innovative ways.

4.8   The Scottish Government launched the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband programme in 2012 with the ambition to deliver superfast broadband to 95% of premises by 2020 as part of the Digital Scotland Programme. The programme invested £463m in connected over 950,600 premises, 110,000 more than originally anticipated.

4.9   Following this, the R100 (Reaching 100%) Programme was launched, and is currently underway with a commitment to deliver speeds of at least 30Mbps to the premises not covered by the original programme.

4.10   Unlike the original programme, connectivity for the R100 Programme is being delivered by a range of methods including FTTP, FWA, Fixed Mobile and Satellite, recognising the advantages of these methods for hard to reach rural and urban sites.

4.11   One option for funding delivery is the use of the R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) which provides a subsidy of up to £5,000 to eligible premises and covers all direct installation costs, which is carried out by a registered supplier assuming that the current connection speed is less than 30Mbps and there are no plans for a superfast connection as part of the R100 contracts of planned commercial build. The voucher scheme is technology neutral in delivery method.

4.12   The programme has set up a dedicated portal for Elected Members to receive updates and geographically linked information on progress with the rollout of connectivity as part of the programme, and Members can sign up access to the portal at https://www.scotlandsuperfast.com/elected-members/ . The website also provides a range of information for citizens.

Council Role in Broadband Delivery

4.13 The Council receives regular updates on the R100 Programme from the Scottish Government.

4.14 A range of Council services are also engaged with fibre providers regarding the support of the infrastructure aspects of improved connectivity including roads, planning and housing.

5. Next Steps

5.1 The Council will engage directly with the R100 programme on the premises affected by the withdrawal of WeLink to determine options for connectivity including the use of SBVS.

5.2 The Council will also review options for the other areas eligible for support within the City of Edinburgh Council area with the R100 Programme team.

6. Financial impact

6.1 There are no financial impacts within this report.

7. Equality and Poverty Impact

7.1 There are no direct equality and poverty impacts as a result of this report.

8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

8.1 There are no direct climate and nature emergency implications as a result of this report.

9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact

9.1 There are no such impacts as part of this report.

10. Background reading/external references

11. Appendices