

Rural Broadband Update -

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An effective, reliable, secure and fast communications infrastructure is increasingly essential to life in both rural and urban communities. It is important that all of our communities and businesses are able to benefit from the convenience online services provide.

There is a requirement to do more than just bridging the digital divide –communities and businesses need to have tools to fully access public services and commercial opportunities. Businesses in particular cannot compete nationally or globally without greatly improved broadband speeds and reliability.

There remains a commitment from Central Government to ensuring that virtually all homes receive the minimum level of service of 2Mbps by 2015. It is recognised that the solutions used to deliver 2Mbps will in most cases deliver far greater bandwidth so 2Mbps would be the minimum speed available. As a result super-fast broadband and the universal service objective have been aligned.

Work that Shropshire Council has completed to date

Extensive mapping of current broadband speeds has been completed so that the extent of the issue is known. This work means that technical and financial modelling can take place.

Qualitative data is being collected to support the business case for funding and also help develop project outcomes. This data is being supported by the results from the residential and business surveys that people are being encouraged to complete.

£2 million has been included in the capital programme to improve broadband in Shropshire.

Shropshire Council submitted a full bid to BDUK as part of Wave 2 in April 2011. Only 3 bids were approved, unfortunately Shropshire was not one of these. In feedback and work completed with BDUK since the submission BDUK confirmed that it would be 'when' we are allocated funding and not 'if'.

In August 2011, BDUK confirmed that Shropshire (including Telford and Wrekin) will be awarded £8.2 million to address rural broadband. This funding allocation is fantastic news and means that real progress can now be made on progressing the project.

What is Shropshire Council doing now?

Now the BDUK funding figure is known the rural broadband project team is working to finalise the scope for delivery.

A programme board with member involvement will be created to oversee the work of the project team.

Work will continue with Telford and Wrekin to confirm joint project governance and delivery options moving forward.

Briefings will be made during the October LJC meetings outlining the project and the important role that Parish Councils will play in that process.

The outcomes of all this work will be presented to the programme board and Cabinet in October 2011 for approval. The local broadband plan can then be re submitted for approval by BDUK.

Once approval is obtained by Cabinet and BDUK, a procurement and state aid process will be completed to procure a technical partner. Due to the size and complexity of the contract this will take many months. During this time demand stimulation work will take place with communities and businesses around broadband. Where people have concerns about using the internet, support will be offered. We do not just want to deploy an infrastructure; it is important that we ensure people have the skills to use it.

Conclusion

The final outcomes of this project when completed in 2016, provide a tremendous opportunity to remove the digital divide in rural communities, encourage economic growth and allow the transformation of public services in Shropshire.

Notes

BDUK - Broadband Delivery UK is a delivery vehicle for the Government's policies on broadband and managing the waves of funding. BDUK's goals include facilitating the delivery of universal broadband and stimulating private sector investment to deliver the best super-fast broadband network in Europe by 2015.