East Devon Digital Connectivity

Report summary:

The purpose of this report is to provide members with an update on the current status of different initiatives to improve digital connectivity in East Devon. Specifically the report will:

- Provide an update on the roll-out of the Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) programme since a new delivery contract was awarded at the end of 2020

- Provide an update on the latest developments by Jurassic Fibre

- Present a case study of an ultra-fast broadband connection supplied to a new residential and commercial development in East Devon (Winslade Park at Clyst St. Mary)

- Highlight an alternative way to connect hard to reach rural areas through the Starlink satellite internet service piloted in East Devon (KOR Communications case study)

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget   Yes ☒ No ☐

Policy Framework   Yes ☒ No ☐

Recommendation:

That members note the contents of this update report on Digital Connectivity in East Devon.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure members remain informed about current and planned improvements to digital connectivity in East Devon.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply)**:**
☐ Climate Action and Emergency Response
☐ Coast, Country and Environment
☐ Council and Corporate Co-ordination
☐ Democracy, Transparency and Communications
☒ Economy and Assets

☐ Finance
☐ Strategic Planning
☐ Sustainable Homes and Communities
☐ Tourism, Sports, Leisure and Culture

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk

Links to background information:

CDS East Devon Local Authority Brief issued 27-03-18

CDS East Devon Local Authority Brief issued 23-12-20

Link to Statement of Intent

Priorities (check which apply)

☐ Better Homes and Communities for all
☐ Greener East Devon
☒ A resilient Economy
☐ Services that matter

Report in full

1. Background and Context

1.1 We are emerging from a period of unprecedented economic change. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of our economy and society. It has challenged established working models and practices. Prompted by periods of national restrictions, working from home has become a new norm, and it is expected to have long-lasting impact on how businesses approach their operational models going forward.

1.2 These changes highlight further the importance of a reliable and fast digital and broadband infrastructure and associated connectivity.

1.3 Set in a predominantly rural environment, East Devon has its challenges in delivering such infrastructure, but at the same time it is seeing one of the most significant private investments in digital infrastructure delivered by Jurassic Fibre and is benefitting from the largest public funded super-fast broadband programme in the country – Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS).

2. Government Policy

2.1 Building Digital UK (BDUK), part of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) is responsible for ensuring that every UK home and business can access fast and reliable digital connectivity.

2.2 The National policy of superfast connectivity which delivers speeds of 30 Mbps is now shifting towards gigabit capability of 1000Mbps. The Government has set itself a target of a minimum of 85% gigabit-capable coverage for the UK by 2025.

DCMS have embarked on a [Full Fibre Broadband Strategy](#), to overbuild the Superfast capability already deployed. This strategy is required to ensure that Broadband infrastructure can support the ever increasing bandwidth demand from users.

2.3 The Government is investing £5 billion to ensure that everyone will have the same access to gigabit-capable broadband, launching a new [Project Gigabit programme](#) and subsidising roll-out of gigabit-capable broadband in the most difficult to reach 20% of UK. This is to be a central government procured programme to deliver Full fibre to the final 20% of properties.

2.4 In March 2021 the Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) published an [open call for evidence](#) on improving broadband for "Very Hard to Reach Premises" (VHTRPs) in the UK.

2.5 Feedback pointed to an increasing need for Government and wider public sector investment in digital connectivity in rural areas and that the VHTRAs are at risk of being left behind without it. Gigabit solutions are needed to remove the digital divide and support the levelling up agenda.

2.6 A mix of large contractual delivery, in parallel with support for community solutions through voucher schemes, is needed to tackle the challenges of delivering broadband to the most rural communities.

3. Public funded CDS programme background and update

3.1 The Government launched their strategy '[Britain's Superfast Broadband Future](#)' at the end of 2010, outlining their ambition to dramatically increase superfast broadband access across the UK. The strategy, managed by the Government's Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) included considerable funding to help local authorities deliver broadband into areas that were not covered under a declared commercial programme.

3.2 The Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS) programme was set up in 2013 under the Government's Superfast Broadband Programme to deliver next generation broadband infrastructure to areas where the commercial market has failed to invest. Whilst the ambition for the programme was to achieve close to 100% superfast coverage, it was acknowledged and expected that there would be a small percentage of premises across the CDS area which would not be covered by commercial plans or the main phases of the CDS programme.

3.3 The first phase of the superfast broadband programme was delivered by BT between January 2013 and March 2017. The majority of the Phase 1 delivery was achieved through fibre to the cabinet (FTTC) technology, with a small number of harder to reach homes and businesses benefitting from fibre to the premises (FTTP).

3.4 The CDS programme has tracked Superfast coverage since its inception in 2013. Commercially, BT as the only significant operator at that time, delivered to 31,200 of the 72,500 premises in East Devon district. This is a percentage of 43.5%, whereas the national average of Superfast delivered commercially at that time was 67%. This was the base position of the BDUK programme and it set a target to increase coverage from 67% to 90% by 2015. CDS placed a contract with BT Group to deliver superfast broadband to an additional 30,000 premises and this was rolled out incrementally across the period and completed in early 2017. This achievement doubled the percentage of East Devon premises covered to 85%.

3.5 In 2014 the Government announced a superfast broadband extension programme, providing funding on a matched funded basis with the aim of achieving 95% superfast coverage nationally by the end of 2017.

3.6 The CDS Phase 2 procurement signed off six FTTP contracts. The East Devon contract was awarded to Gigaclear. Due to poor performance these contracts were cancelled by CDS.

3.7 In 2020 CDS commenced a procurement process that led to the appointment of Airband by year end. The Open Market Review process for this resulted in the superfast coverage in East Devon being identified at 88.5%, an increase of 3.5% due to commercial build activity. On completion of the CDS contract, which will deliver Gigabit capable services, the superfast delivery in East Devon is estimated to reach over 97%.

3.8 As mentioned in section 2.3 the Government has announced a £5bn investment plan to deliver nationwide gigabit coverage by 2025. The first tranche of this has been set aside within this Parliament, and Government are running a series of central procurements to roll out gigabit solutions. The new CDS contracts will support this objective. CDS is currently in the third tranche of areas to go forward under Project Gigabit and is in discussion with Government to prepare for this and to make a case to go more quickly. Market appetite and capacity are clear constraints on moving this forward, nationally and locally, and several of the areas announced earlier by Government have moved back in the planned sequencing. Given that CDS is now delivering full fibre technologies under all its live contracts, conversations are also underway with Government about adding to these as part of Project Gigabit as a faster way to extend gigabit capable networks in Devon and Somerset.

3.9 The CDS Team to manage these contracts is headed by Keri Denton, Service Lead for Devon County Council (DCC) Economy as Programme Director. Its personnel are drawn from DCC and Somerset County Council (SCC), and they have Technical Assurance and Contract Management support from two private companies, re-procured through an open tender recently.

3.10 The programme governance is based on a collaborative approach led by the CDS Programme Board who meet quarterly ensuring that the programme is delivered in accordance with the Local Broadband Plan. The board includes cabinet members and chief executives from the Devon and Somerset Councils, CDS officers, representatives from the other authorities and central government's BDUK team.

3.11 Airband is now contracted to deliver full fibre broadband to homes and businesses in earmarked areas of Devon and Somerset and require the construction of an estimated 2,419 miles of fibre network.

- In East Devon 6,086 homes/businesses will receive full fibre connection by Airband under the new contract. At this stage it is too soon to say which premises will be connected
- Delivery will be in phases between 2021 and 2024 with anticipated completion by September 2024
- Construction of first link for the new network in Devon due to start in September 2021
- 92 East Devon premises will get full fibre by Openreach under the CDS Fibre Extension Programme

3.12 Airband have put together a programme of surveys in East Devon during Summer 2021 as a first step towards building new networks. Surveying has started in the East Devon areas of:

- Budleigh Salterton to Ottery St Mary
- Sidmouth, Gittisham, Colyton
- Axminster

3.13 During the period January to April 2021 Airband secured sub-contractors, established governance processes, communication plans, quality plans, business systems and reporting structure to ensure the programme keeps to the agreed delivery plan. It also undertook an open market review to confirm earmarked areas still require public subsidy and establish the geography of the new networks to be established.

3.14 Airband are under contract with CDS to provide FTTP to selected premises (by CDS) who have poor broadband connectivity, but Airband do not choose these premises and there is no obligation from those selected premises to connect to the network. These premises are classed as "In Contract" with CDS.

3.15 Many other premises along the fibre route and within close proximity may also be able to access the network once completed and subject to survey. These premises are classed as "Out of Contract" and in most cases will be able to connect to the fibre network as well.

3.16 The order by which work starts in each individual area is determined by the most economical and effective way in which the programme can be delivered. Wherever possible, current infrastructure within the area will be used to minimise disruption and inconvenience. Airband has created 60 individual community projects for these contracts which will form the basis for communication with parishes as the build progresses.

3.17 Airband have recently updated their website to include a list of the community areas covered by the new contracts and anticipated completion date. Airband is developing an online premise level checker for communities covered by all CDS contracts, new and pre-existing, which is expected to be published later this autumn. Table 1.1 below shows forecast completion date for areas within East Devon under the new contract.

Cluster Number	Cluster Name	Forecast Completion Date
13	Axminster	Q1 2022
10	Budleigh Salteron to Ottery St Mary	Q2 2022
11	Sidmouth, Gittisham, Colyton	Q3 2022
14	Rousdon to East Lyme	Q3 2022
12	Wilmingtom	Q3 2023
9	Stockland	Q3 2023
5	M5 to Upottery	Q1 2024
8	M5 to Payhembury	Q2 2024

Table 1.1 Timetable of anticipated completion dates for Airband's contract in East Devon

3.17 Those areas and properties that are not covered under the current CDS project are encouraged by Airband's Community Engagement Team to consider using the BDUK Gigabit Voucher scheme and submit a "Suggest a Project" to a Demand Led Project team for consideration. There is ongoing communication with the project managers and teams to discuss extending fibre routes to encompass other properties just outside the project area.

3.18 In June 2021 Airband's community engagement programme in East Devon included a number of Parish Council meetings covering East Budleigh, Aylesbeare and Membury.

Parish Council meetings booked for late Summer 2021 include Newton Poppleford, Axmouth, Gittisham, Colyton and Beer.

They have 845 registers of interests to connect to fibre throughout the project plan so far.

Community engagement on wayleave issues is proving effective in reducing delay and roll out of project clusters.

There is lots of engagement and interest via email and phone calls from residents within East Devon. The community engagement team were in attendance at the Devon County Show in

early July 2021 and received high number of enquiries and questions from East Devon residents.

3.19 All Parish Councils have or will be shortly contacted to arrange a meeting and given an overview and formal presentation of the CDS project within their area from the community engagement team. Monthly newsletters go out to all parishes with regular updates on the CDS/Airband project within that area.

4. Private investment in broadband infrastructure - Jurassic Fibre update

4.1 Completely separate to the publicly subsidised CDS programme, East Devon is benefitting from an entirely private sector investment which is further developing our district's fibre broadband infrastructure and bringing additional connectivity options to thousands of local residents and businesses.

4.2 Founded in 2018, Jurassic Fibre was created to address the digital inequality experienced by communities in the South West. The Exeter and East Devon-based company is utilising a £250m investment from Fern Trading, advised by Octopus Energy, to build its own ultrafast fibre broadband network across Devon, Somerset and Dorset. Its goal is to provide full fibre connectivity to over 350,000 properties over the coming years.

4.3 Jurassic Fibre is continuing to deploy at pace across East Devon. Service is now live in Exmouth and Honiton and the network is being expanded along the southern coast towards the Dorset border. The company has announced their plans for coverage in Sidmouth and the surrounding villages of Sidbury, Weston, Salcombe Regis and Branscombe.

4.4 Their network now covers over 50k residential and commercial premises across Devon, Dorset and Somerset and are connecting around 10k premises per month at present.

4.5 They have established an 'on demand' programme which is identifying areas close by to their network which can be picked up very quickly. Examples include Aylesbeare which was built in under 6 months, and Gittisham is expected to launch by the autumn.

Jurassic Fibre is registered for the DCMS Voucher Programme, however to date the company have found that they can provide superfast broadband coverage on a commercial basis without the need for vouchers in areas expected to use them.
Their on-demand programme is progressing well and steering the network at design stage into areas where they see demand i.e. by people registering their interest via their website.

4.6 They are currently working with Exeter College to design a programme addressing current skill shortages within the digital connectivity industry. They are discussing proposals for apprenticeships starting in the autumn term, with summer boot camps for skills building and selection. A significant recruitment demand in their Sales and Construction teams is driving this opportunity. Skills areas will focus on:
- Civil engineering
- Construction
- Fibre Networks
- Planning
- Sales and Marketing
- IT and Technology
- Support

Work experience will be provided with both Jurassic Fibre and their subcontractors.

4.7 Jurassic Fibre offer a range of residential and business packages, starting at £25 per month for the basic package of 30Mbps to to an enterprise-grade package providing 10Gbps. All packages are flexible 1-month contracts which allow customers to increase and decrease

their speed / package as they need. They have installed their first 10gb Business Link to Winslade Park in March 2021 (details in the case study in Section 5).

5. Winslade Park case study

5.1 Jurassic Fibre has installed its first 10Gbps connection at Winslade Park in Clyst St. Mary. Winslade Park is a £80 million private investment in a lifestyle-led development offering new ways of working and living combining commercial, residential, wellbeing and entertainment opportunities. It is the largest development of its kind in the South West.

5.2 The business park, which currently hosts around 2,500 workers, was connected to Jurassic Fibre's cutting-edge network in March 2021.

5.3 With a 10Gbps connection from Jurassic Fibre, businesses will benefit from faster and more reliable connectivity, with access to a local customer support team based in Exeter.

5.4 Jurassic Fibre has future-proofed the network of the site to allow new buildings to be installed in line with expansion plans.

5.5 The ultrafast service will support the customers of Winslade Park in improving efficiency and productivity, not just through faster and more reliable speeds, but through enhanced security and customer service.

5.6 The connection will cover the whole estate to encourage use of the grounds for outdoor meetings and personal working.
The residential homes on the estate will also benefit from this ultra-fast connectivity, facilitating those who want to efficiently work from home.

6. Starlink satellite internet service case study

6.1 East Devon covers predominantly rural areas and businesses in remote locations are commonly experience unreliable or poor digital connections. The inconsistency of broadband and mobile internet coverage is a key barrier for their productivity and growth, as highlighted in the South West Rural Productivity Commission: Key Findings and Recommendations: Key Findings and Recommendations 2017.

6.2 This case study is an example of a technological solution in a rural area where broadband connectivity is unavailable.

6.3 KOR Communications, based in Broadclyst, took part in trial of Starlink satellite internet service to deliver faster broadband speeds to their office.

6.4 This case study examines their experience with the service as another opportunity to access fast broadband in a rural environment for the business community in East Devon.

6.5 As a business based in a rural area, KOR Communications have been struggling with a poor, copper-wire broadband connection for the last few years. It was expected that Openreach would provide a FTTP connection to their office by October 2021 as part of the roll out of the public network in the area, but at the end of 2020 they announced that this stretch of the operation was now cancelled due to insufficient funds to complete the project. The solution they offered to this business was a leased line for £325 + VAT a month.

6.6 Like most companies, their staff have been working from home during the pandemic and due to poor broadband, the team has struggled to access their server using a VPN connection which has affected their productivity.

6.7 Not wanting to commit to the leased line, and with no FTTP installation on the horizon, KOR decided to explore the potential of Elon Musk's Starlink service which was launched in the UK in early 2021. This is a high speed broadband service delivered via satellites orbiting the Earth and received by a satellite dish.

6.8 Companies can sign up for the service via the Starlink website and it requires a purchase of a satellite dish at a cost of just under £500 shipped from California. An app helps users install the equipment. Once in place and operational, the app allows users to run speed tests and monitor usage and dropouts.

6.9 Based on KOR's experience, dropouts are minimal and the download speeds are usually around 80 to 120Mb. Starlink has announced speeds will double by Summer 2021.

6.10 The monthly service fee is £89, which is comparable to an FTTP connection of a similar speed where it's available. There is no contract and subscribers can cancel the service at any time.

6.11 According to KOR Communications experience, this service is an ideal solution for companies or homes which require a high speed broadband connection but will not receive an FTTP connection in the near future.

7. Mobile connectivity

7.1 Investment in mobile phone infrastructure comes predominantly from the private sector as much more areas are commercially viable compared to broadband investment.

As more people access Internet via their mobile phones, access to sufficient mobile internet is today a key factor in the development of the local economy.

7.2 The majority of improvements to mobile phone connectivity (voice and data) in Devon is expected to be delivered by commercial providers. Devon County Council are exploring the range of potential options for using public subsidy to improve mobile phone coverage across the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (HotSW LEP) area.

7.3 The [Connecting Devon and Somerset Mobile Boost Scheme](#) has been designed to help small businesses and households who currently have poor indoor mobile coverage.
The programme aims to upgrade indoor 4G coverage within businesses and homes in order to improve connectivity and the ability to make voice calls. The programme will focus on small business connections and will target those premises which have no adequate 4G indoor coverage from any operator or only one operator.

7.4 The programme allows businesses and households to apply for a voucher of up to £1200 towards the cost of one of a number of mobile signal booster options from a registered scheme supplier. The value of the voucher will be dependent on the type of technology most suitable for the premises in question. Businesses and residents will be required to make a contribution which, depending on the option chosen, will range from £200 for installation to a monthly fee for a SIM card (averaging circa £30 per month).

8. Importance of digital connectivity and opportunities for EDDC to support it

8.1 Reliable and fast broadband connectivity is vital for enabling economic growth, supporting business performance and our communities.

8.2 The Covid-19 pandemic has further underlined the vital importance of good digital connectivity to economic and social well-being of rural areas, especially where lower average

wages and poor social mobility are already observed. Communities, households and business without access to sufficient broadband are clearly disadvantaged.

8.3 Delivery of gigabit connectivity is essential in supporting our economic recovery plan, and along with skills shortages, is a key issue constraining businesses from being able to bounce back, support young people in their learning, and deliver on our low carbon ambitions.

8.4 Fast, reliable digital connectivity is an essential means of breaking down the barriers of isolation, strengthening community resilience and improving the lives of people in these communities. Digital connectivity has the potential to alleviate social isolation especially in rural areas.

8.5 With public service delivery being digital by default and the impact of the Covid pandemic where work, school and everyday essential were predominantly accessed digitally, local authorities need to play their role in making sure that no one is left behind because of inability to afford access broadband/digital connectivity.

8.6 During the third period of national restrictions in January 2021 a [UK-wide study conducted by the Citizens Advice](#) determined that more than one in six people are struggling to afford broadband. Not having access or not being able to afford access to broadband is a significant barrier for many households.

8.7 EDDC's Anti-Poverty Strategy identifies that digital exclusion is one of the issues impacting on residents in poverty in East Devon. People on low incomes are less likely to able to afford internet access. Some cases seen by the Council's Financial Resilience Team have identified that Social Housing is being built without landlines connected and tenants are unable to afford the connection charge (standard connection charge is normally £140). This is a significant amount for low income households who will also have other upfront costs such as: carpets, white goods, etc. As a result tenants are having to rely on mobile contracts or pay as you go top up as they cannot access broadband deals. Some of this group are unable to pass credit checks for the cheaper mobile contracts and are therefore unable to access the cheaper tariffs available. A further number cannot afford to top up mobiles so are unable to access the support required by services who need them to engage either online or over the phone. This also makes it difficult or impossible to apply for Universal Credit and other benefits, access cheaper utility deals, apply for jobs, access public services or sign up for improving skills courses making it harder to break the poverty cycle.

8.8 As highlighted by Economic Development in their presentation to the Poverty panel 'Update on the labour market' on 20th September 2021, there are clearly many highly skilled jobs that now include the ability to work from home and although that can remove the travel barrier, without good access to broadband people on low incomes will still potentially be excluded from accessing those jobs.

8.9 Promoting an inclusive economy, by raising skills and improving access to a range of employment opportunities for people on low incomes is one of the objectives of EDDC's Anti-Poverty Strategy. Tackling the digital divide through investment in both digital infrastructure and skills is one of the instruments to achieve this objective.

8.10 East Devon District Council can support further digital connectivity improvements in the district by liaising with delivery partners and operators in the area and supporting the community engagement of their programmes.

8.11 While we have limited scope to influence delivery, we can work collaborative with companies and programmes providing public and private investment in broadband and digital connectivity to support their efforts to cover most of East Devon's area.

8.12 The Growth, Development and Prosperity Service has been commissioning business support programmes for East Devon businesses through the last few years aimed at enhancing productivity, business adaptation and resilience. A significant part of the training programmes addressed digital skills, capabilities and technological solutions ensuring that businesses and organisations in East Devon can take advantage of the rollout of superfast broadband and stimulating demand for the broadband coverage.

8.13 The Council can also consider adopting an approach where broadband infrastructure and planning conditions ensure that new homes have access to broadband from day one recognising superfast broadband as the fifth utility.

8.14 In summary, East Devon is seeing good progress in both public and private programmes of investment in digital connectivity. While EDDC's scope to influence these programmes is limited, we can make best use of our policy frameworks and partnerships to ensure businesses and communities within East Devon are able to prosper within a world-class digital infrastructure.

Financial implications:

There are no direct financial implication connected to the recommendation of this report.

Legal implications:

The report does not raise any legal implications requiring comment.