Shropshire Council Briefing Note for RSN Seminar 25th May 2022
Re Digital Connectivity Challenges

Purpose

- To update RSN about current strategic activity by Shropshire Council with regards to digital connectivity and digital inclusion.

- To brief RSN on Shropshire Council's position and positive action pending the landline 'digital' switchover planned for 2025 by BT Openreach.

- To invite feedback from participants to strategic approaches to 'digital inclusion', in order to share comparator approaches and facilitate learning.

Current strategic activity

Shropshire Council is developing what is described as a "Digital County" project. This sits within a wider Target Operating Model (TOM) programme which will contribute towards the Council's new Shropshire Plan.

It is recognised that 'digital accessibility' is fundamental to how Local Authorities and partners can engage more efficiently with communities. The challenges of moving to full digital services include the associated risks of getting all of our communities accessing services online where these are available.

The TOM will look at the issue of connectivity and gaps, including Project Gigabit, together with associated barriers of take up associated to affordability and skills.

A range of different datasets will be used to baseline and inform this project work, including intelligence that we already hold, along with feedback from key partners, such as the voluntary and community sector and town and parish councils, with regard to issues of isolation and loneliness that cut across demography/geography challenges and have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Shropshire has a significant challenge with an aging population. 25% of the population is aged 65 and this is projected to rise to 33% by 2043.

We will be assessing the digital equality and equity impacts for people in Protected groupings as defined by the Equality Act 2010, and for those in the wider grouping of households that we would describe as being at greater risk of social exclusion. In so doing, we will be drawing upon our approach to equality impact assessments, which we term Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessments (ESHIA) and into which we factor the economic and environmental impacts of any proposed service change, whether due to national policy or our own strategic decisions as a Council.

A Project Team will be established to scope the 'Digital Accessibility' project. The work will look at who is unable to transact digitally and why, and whether it is related to 'infrastructure', 'skills' or 'affordability'. The work will consider the risks of 'project gigabit' and 'digital switchover' to the most vulnerable.

Landline switch off

Openreach's planned landline switch off or switchover from analogue copper lines to fibre optic technology is due to be completed in 2025/26.

Shropshire Council submitted a comprehensive response to Ofcom in 2018 on the issue of "protecting access to emergency services in power cuts at customer premises". The evidence demonstrates not only the Council's commitment to supporting the people that we define as vulnerable and to emphasising the importance of Communication Providers like BT Consumer playing their part, but also our approach to continuing to take every opportunity to articulate that commitment, both to central Government and to agencies such as Ofcom.

Meetings have been held with DCMS (Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), in order to emphasise that there is a policy imperative around improved national communication and engagement about the ramifications of the landline switch off and the perceived risks. This is particularly so for households and people that we would describe as vulnerable customers and who rely upon devices connected to telecare services. Notwithstanding the Ofcom requirement that there is to be what they describe as an "uninterrupted service for emergency services", and the BT Openreach commitment to 'battery backup' for households receiving telecare, concerns remain for us as a local authority on behalf of our communities.

We continue to press the case for an improved communication campaign by DCMS and dialogue with Ofcom, alongside our own efforts to the LGA and critically BT Openreach. We will undertake a review of the associated risks to define and identify the extent of vulnerable households, for a mix of factors including age, disability and residency in rural and/or isolated locations.

We will be making contact with Ofcom ourselves, following Full Council on 12th May, at which an interim response was made by our portfolio holder to a detailed question from a member of public on behalf of those living in rural locations in particular.

Communication Providers are expected to identify which of their customers are vulnerable, including those who are digitally excluded, i.e. they don't have a broadband connection and will need an alternative migration solution.

Invitation for feedback on approaches

Shropshire Council is keen to hear from other rural local authorities, with regards to efforts to move services online in ways that will neither exclude those unable or unwilling to access such services, nor hinder those for whom online is a more accessible medium of communication, provided connectivity is assured.

The Council is also keen to hear from local authorities on approaches being taken or planned to support households ahead of the planned landline switch off. The linked matter of potential changes to the Universal Service Obligation placed on telecoms suppliers, principally BT, with regard to numbers and locations of operational payphones and consultation processes, is also one of such concern to us that we put in a response to Ofcom consultation in January 2022, setting out our qualms and caveats in no uncertain terms.

We have also made contact with DCMS to emphasise the need for village halls to be considered as Project GigaHub sites, and will be happy to share our submission.