

North Yorkshire Council

Transport, Economy, Environment and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1 February 2024

Rural Connectivity

Report of the Transformation Director Robert Ling and NYnet Alastair Taylor

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The report sets out to update the progress of digital connectivity across North Yorkshire

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 North Yorkshire Council and its predecessors have been working with the UK Government to address the lack of digital connectivity across rural areas. BDUK (Building Digital UK) the delivery arm for the Department of Science, Innovation, and Technology has the overall mandate for the delivery of national targets.

3.0 CONNECTIVITY UPDATE

3.1 NYnet the North Yorkshire owned telecoms company has delivered four phases of Superfast North Yorkshire contracts in conjunction with BDUK. In 2009 superfast coverage across North Yorkshire was at approx. 41%, Phase 1 was awarded in 2011/12 to BT with a contract value of £26.5m, further contracts were let to BT in 2015 and 2017 totalling circa £28m which saw coverage climb to 94% by 2020. To tackle the final 10% a wireless contract has been awarded to Quickline in 2020 with an expected increase in coverage to 94% by 2024.

3.2 North Yorkshire Council offers a free WIFI service in 21 market towns across the geography, the service which started in 2021 with support from a Government grant to combat the impact of COVID. Currently the service across North Yorkshire attracts around 70k users per week, making use of both the free Wi-Fi but also access to Govroam for public sector workers and Eduroam for those in education.

3.3 Whilst the Superfast Programme was delegated to Local Bodies with overall supervision by BDUK, the new Project Gigabit is run directly by BDUK with consultation and involvement from the local body. The UK has been split into multiple lots for Project Gigabit. These have been decided based on BT exchanges and other technological reasons and therefore there are instances where small numbers of premises will be in a different lots. The majority of North Yorkshire's premises are in Lots 8 and 31. Lot 8 is primarily West Yorkshire however it includes Selby District and Skipton. This was designed as they are both better built from West Yorkshire and will likely lead to a better outcome for these two areas. Lot 31 is the rest of North Yorkshire. The number of premises in each lot is detailed below:

Lot	Total No Premises	Value
8 – West Yorkshire and York	29,000	£61m
31 – North Yorkshire	33,619	£76m

Both lots are currently out for procurement at the ITT stage. Lot 8 is expected to award by the end of the year with Lot 31 in early 2024. There is commercial interest in both lots and therefore there is a good chance of them being awarded. Superfast North Yorkshire expects there to be approximately 11,000 premises which will not be covered by the end of Phase 4. These will be included in Lot 31. Whilst some of these will be classified as 'Very Hard to Reach' we would expect this number to be no more than 3,000 therefore the majority should be upgraded as part of Project Gigabit.

3.4 North Yorkshire has attracted a significant number of Alternative Network Operators (Altnets). This has been made possible through a combination of marketing the County directly to Altnets as well as the use of NYnet assets to reduce the cost of entry. NYnet works with Altnets to provide backhaul capacity across North Yorkshire to transit the internet from rural locations within North Yorkshire back to major internet hubs in Darlington and Leeds. Through the use of NYnet's network Altnets are able to access high-capacity links at the same price they would in built up areas reducing the cost of doing business in rural areas. In addition, NYnet allows Altnets to use its dark fibre and duct network to lower the cost of digging whilst reducing the inconvenience to residents. A good example of this was in Stokesley where the Altnet used NYnet's fibre to reach Great Ayton instead of undertaking 4km of roadworks.

In addition to Openreach the following Altnets have or are building network in North Yorkshire:

Provider	Areas Covered/Being Deployed
Zzoomm	Northallerton, Thirsk, Sowerby, Easingwold, Tadcaster, Sherburn-in-Elmet, South Milford, Stokesley, Great Ayton
Swish	Bedale, Sherburn-in-Elmet, South Milford, Colburn, Leyburn, Boroughbridge, Knaresborough
City Fibre	Harrogate, Knaresborough, Ripon
Voneus	North of Malton between Hovingham and Swinton. Bedale, Villages around and including Masham
Gigaclear	Selby
KCOM	Selby

3.5 The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has launched trials and a consultation around Very Hard to Reach premises. These are the 0.4% of premises across the UK that are likely to not be covered by Project Gigabit. Unfortunately, it is highly likely that these 0.4% will be premises that currently do not have Superfast broadband either. It is also likely that North Yorkshire will have a disproportionate amount of VTHR premises (above the average of 0.4%) due to its geography. The solution for these premises will therefore be of the utmost importance. DSIT currently has 4 alpha trials using Low Earth Orbit Satellite (either OneWeb or Starlink). One of these is a Starlink solution at Rievaulx Abbey. NYnet also has two Starlink trials of its own at North York Moors visitors' centres which have delivered fantastic results. DSIT have recently released a consultation around the VTHR programme, NYC will be submitting a response. Initial indications have suggested there will likely be a multitude of solutions for these premises, these could be:

- Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite schemes offering vouchers to pay for the hardware cost
- Programmes to share LEO satellites between multiple premises
- The use of Fixed Wireless Access to achieve speeds of over 100Mbps (but below gigabit)
- Targeted voucher-based interventions

The indication is that whilst it is understood that these premises will not receive gigabit broadband, the intent is for them to receive a minimum of 100Mbps rather than the current (unfunded) 10Mbps USO.

- 3.6 Public Phone Boxes are being removed across the country by BT if they meet certain conditions as set out by OFCOM. Public Phone boxes can be removed from the community should the area have good mobile coverage from the four major telecoms providers (Vodafone, EE, Three, O2) and they have made less than 52 calls in a twelve-month period. A consultation period is conducted for each identified phone box via the planning service, North Yorkshire currently has 30 phone boxes under consultation.
- 3.7 The Shared Rural Network (SRN) is a project developed by the UK's four mobile network operators (MNOs) with support from the government. The programme aims to make 4G mobile broadband available to 95% of the UK, improving 4G coverage in the areas that need it most and addressing the digital divide. The SRN is a deal with EE, O2, Three and Vodafone investing in a network of new and existing phone masts, overseen by a jointly owned company called Digital Mobile Spectrum Limited. It will provide guaranteed coverage to 280,000 premises and 16,000km of roads. The SRN is expected to increase coverage in some areas by more than a third, with the biggest coverage improvements in rural parts of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. It will also improve geographic coverage to 79% of Areas of Natural Beauty and 74% of National Parks. North Yorkshire will benefit from this Government initiative where we would expect coverage to rise from 70% currently to just over 90%, however due to the nature of the areas requiring masts, progress is slower than anticipated due to the challenges of planning in National Parks and ANOBs.

4.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1 N/A

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 N/A

6.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 N/A

7.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

7.1 N/A

8.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

8.1 N/A

9.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Information paper to update members as to the progress of digital connectivity

10.0 RECOMMENDATION

i) Councillors to note progress

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Note: Members are invited to contact the author in advance of the meeting with any detailed queries or questions.