



*Neuadd y Sir / County Hall, Llandrindod, Powys, LD1 5LG*

## **QUESTIONS AT ANY TIME TO CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

Response by the Portfolio Holder:

Supporting improved digital connectivity and exploiting the benefits of digital technology in Powys is a priority of the Council. Digital connectivity is an essential part of modern life, influencing how individuals work, communicate and access services and is vital to enable a thriving economy.

At a regional level, improving digital connectivity is a priority of the new Vision for Growing Mid Wales economic strategy and is expected to have a central role in the Mid Wales Growth Deal. Investment in digital infrastructure and supporting the adoption and exploitation of next generation digital technologies like 5G will be critical to improving productivity, capitalising on innovation and becoming more competitive as a region.

While Powys has seen improvements in digital infrastructure coverage over recent years, deployment of high-speed broadband, fibre to premises provision and mobile coverage in many parts of the county still lags significantly behind that of Wales and the UK. The remote rural nature of the county, its geography, commercial viability and the nature of technologies means that 'not spots' are prevalent particularly in more isolated locations.

Currently approximately 83% of premises in Powys have the capability to connect to Superfast Broadband (30Mbps+), lower than that for Wales (95.5%) and the UK (96.5%). Only 20% of the county currently has access to Ultrafast Broadband (100mbps+) compared to Wales (40%) and the UK (62.5%). Powys has over 10,000 premises which are currently unable to receive superfast broadband (30Mbps) or where there are no plans to provide such service in the next 3 years, the highest of any local authority in Wales.

Co-ordinated action and investment in digital infrastructure by the public and private sector are required to improve digital connectivity and overcome these challenges. The Council is currently engaging with both UK and the Welsh Governments, private sector suppliers and communities to help improve digital connectivity and secure future investment in digital infrastructure across Powys. Responsibility for telecommunications lies with the UK Government, it is not devolved to Welsh Government. The Welsh Government undertakes digital connectivity initiatives under economic development powers. A joined-up approach with all stakeholders is essential to maximise the benefit to Powys communities and businesses.

Last year the Council published its Digital Strategy which sets out its vision for digital transformation and connectivity: <https://en.powys.gov.uk/article/8236/Read-our-Digital-Strategy---its-interactive>. The strategy's digital places objective aims to increase the number of communities supported through advice and assistance regarding community broadband solutions. A new post of Community Broadband

Officer is currently being recruited to provide a dedicated resource to support this work.

The Council is a member of the Welsh Government's Broadband Working Group and is actively engaged in work and discussions to improve digital connectivity both in Powys and Mid Wales, including fast fibre broadband build in partnership with Openreach. Officers are engaging with communities and suppliers on broadband issues across Powys. Welsh Government is now topping up the UK Government's Rural Gigabit Connectivity Voucher. This means that the maximum funding available has recently doubled and is now £7,000 for businesses and £3,000 for residential premises. Further information can be found at: <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/wales/>. A funding application is currently being prepared to Welsh Government's new Local Broadband Grant scheme to support this work and the roll out of community projects in hard to reach locations across Powys.

As part its proposals for the deployment of gigabit broadband, the UK Government will be investing £5 billion through the 'Outside-In' programme to deliver gigabit speeds to the hardest-to-reach communities in the UK. A £1 billion 'Shared Rural Network' deal with the mobile industry has been agreed to extend 4G mobile coverage to the most rural parts of the UK. Councils are well positioned to support investment and roll out by ensuring that effective policies and procedures are in place to promote engagement with suppliers. The deployment of these networks is complex and requires strong collaboration between telecommunications operators, councils and third parties (such as contractors), and internally across council services. Our Public Service Board partners also have a role to play. This includes the roll-out of the Emergency Services' 4G Network (ESN), designed to provide all emergency services with a new communications platform to replace the outdated current Airwave solution. ESN uses existing and newly provisioned EE mobile comms sites (masts) to work across the UK. EE have already built additional masts across the UK to meet ESN demands but are further increasing this to meet gaps within their ESN contractual coverage arrangements. In addition to this Central Government through the Home Office are building additional masts to cover remote rural locations. Each of these sites will have EE equipment installed. Additional Sites Planned for Powys. EE – Dyfed Powys Police area will have an additional 42 sites built and transmitting by September 2021. EAS – 41 sites in passive build by Dec 2021<sup>1</sup>. These new sites will increase the coverage for 4G connection to rural homes in many hard to reach localities.

The Council has an important role to play in delivering improved digital connectivity in Powys and will be working collaboratively with UK and Welsh Governments, industry suppliers, communities, and businesses to support this aim.

---

<sup>1</sup> Passive build means that the sites are built, have power and all equipment installed but are not transmitting as yet.

