Digital Innovation and Efficiency Committee

Item No.

Report title:	**Mobile Phone Coverage**
Date of meeting:	**13 March 2018**
Responsible Chief Officer:	**Tom McCabe – Executive Director, Community and Environmental Services, Simon George – Executive Director, Finance and Commercial Services**

Strategic impact

While the successful Better Broadband for Norfolk Programme has dramatically improved the availability and performance of fixed internet connectivity, the coverage of good mobile voice and data connectivity lags some way behind.

The availability of ubiquitous, fast, reliable mobile voice and data coverage would provide significant benefits for economic development and improved quality of life for the people who live, visit and work in Norfolk.

The committee is committed to working with mobile network operators to improve coverage

Executive summary

The focus of Norfolk County Council and its partners on broadband provision in the county has seen Superfast coverage improve from 43% just a few years ago to 92% today, with firm plans to rise to at least 95% by April 2020. The council is also pursuing opportunities to increase availability of Ultrafast connectivity via fibre to the premise (FTTP), support alternative network providers and low power wide area networks (LoRaWAN).

Meanwhile mobile telecommunications facilities have failed to improve at anywhere near the same pace, not least because government funding has only been available to support fixed broadband.

In February 2018 an independent study of mobile coverage across the county was carried out as directed by this committee. The overall availability of 4G across the county was established to be 84%.

This report a year later summarises progress made to date along with future expectations for improvement and options open to the committee to drive improvements.

Industry and government feedback on Norfolk's collaborative and proactive approach to improving coverage remains that Norfolk is leading national best practice. This included being referenced by MobileUK in their Building Mobile Britain campaign and in publications and events from the Local Government Association, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport as well as the Chambers of Commerce in their no more not spots campaign.

Since the drive study was undertaken, the Council has engaged to varying degrees with each of the four main mobile operators and their industry body MobileUK.

Vodafone has demonstrated the greatest level of improvements, which is impressive given that they already held a coverage advantage according to our 2018 study. EE is currently in active discussions with the council regarding access a number of sites to mount their equipment and O2 have demonstrated active support but to a much more limited extent.

So far, Vodafone has also provided the most compelling plans for ongoing investment in improving county wide coverage over the next 6 months.

Progress has been limited to optimising the use of existing sites rather than taking advantage of new sites based on the Council's offer to host equipment. However, this shows signs of changing now that test cases have established the appropriate "code powers" based rental rates for equipment on roof tops and towers. The rulings have been negative in terms of commercial rental values, but positive in terms of creating a more compelling business case for using council (and other sites) in rural areas.

The recently announced £8m DCMS funding to upgrade 372 council managed sites to full fibre connections could provide mobile network operators with fibre backhaul at these locations, further increasing their attractiveness in terms of cost and performance.

The Ofcom Connected Nations 2018 UK Report states that.

- 9% of UK landmass has no good 4G coverage from any operator. This has improved from 21% a year ago but rural areas are still badly affected.
- 23% of homes and businesses do not have good indoor 4G coverage from all operators.

The council is in discussion with Ofcom in the context of working together to measure the improvements that have been made since the 2018 drive study was undertaken. Use of up-to-date Ofcom coverage maps which take learning from Norfolk's drive study would be beneficial in terms of measuring improvements to date and targeting future improvements. If this is not possible, then repeating the drive study for the areas that had poor coverage last year should be considered.

Recommendations:

1. **That the committee note the information regarding progress with coverage.**
2. **To direct officers to investigate options to measure current coverage via Ofcom or through recommissioning a drive study of the areas that lacked coverage in 2018.**
3. **To direct officers to continue to work with mobile operators and other infrastructure companies to access NCC and other public-sector buildings.**

1. Background and Context

1.1. The current mobile phone coverage levels across Norfolk leave much to be desired and are a source of considerable frustration to residents, visitors and local businesses

Norfolk county council therefore wishes to use its assets and its influence to improve the consistency and quality of mobile voice and data coverage across the county. The February 2018 survey results and engagement with the four main suppliers (and their industry body MobileUK) is intended to enable use of council and other public-sector structures to host equipment to fill current gaps in coverage. Where possible, fibre backhaul will also be provided to improve mobile data capacity. The recently announced £8m of funding from DCMS to upgrade 372 Norfolk sites will help.

2. Progress to Date

2.1. As the survey has not been repeated and comparable Ofcom data is not currently available it is difficult to quantify what improvements have been made. However, the council has seen evidence that investments have been made my mobile operators over the last year. Vodafone has shown by far the greatest level of improvements (based on their data and coverage maps). EE is also actively engaged with the Council at present though evidence of their improvements is not available to share with the committee at this time. We are aware that O2 has done some work to optimise coverage but as with EE very little evidence is available. EE have however been very active in promoting 4G based Broadband alternatives so there appears to have been some level of investment made.

Last month saw the first Tribunal decision on the rental price payable by an operator to a site provider under the new Electronic Communications Code (often referred to as" code powers"). In this case of EE vs LB Islington Tribunal ruled that the value of the Code rights is just £50 in a decision that will be viewed as a victory for operators and sets the sort of precedent that site providers had been fearing, and many of their agents had been assuring them would not happen.

While this is bad news in terms of commercial income, this committee has always been clear that it values improved coverage more than rental incomes for telecommunications equipment. This is therefore good news in terms of improving the business case for rural mobile phone coverage.

2.2.

3. Financial Implications

3.1. There may be a risk that site rental income may reduce as a result of recent court rulings, however this is not a large figure for Norfolk County Council. Business rates increases generated by better mobile phone coverage improving business growth would be likely to be far greater. There may be a cost associated with re-measuring mobile signal coverage, but that is not know at this time.

4. Issues, risks and innovation

4.1. There are no specific items to highlight in relation to this report.

Officer Contact

If you have any questions about matters contained in this paper or want to see copies of any assessments, eg equality impact assessment, please get in touch with:

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