



Report to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Meeting Date – 15th April 2025
Key Decision – Update only
Public/Private – Public

Portfolio – Christopher Southward, Digital Connectivity and Customer Focus Portfolio Holder, Cumberland Council
Peter Thornton, Cabinet Member for Highways and Assets, Westmorland and Furness Council

Directorate – Place, Sustainable Growth and Transport

Lead Officer – Jonathan Harris, Programme Director Connecting Cumbria

Title **Update on Connecting Cumbria and the full fibre network roll out**

1. Summary:

- 1.1. This report is provided as an update to the Committee on the roll out of full fibre broadband by a range of networks across Cumbria. Please note for this report UK Government policy is focused on the delivery of gigabit capable broadband, irrespective of technology, however almost all deployment of gigabit capable services in Cumbria is through the deployment of full fibre infrastructure.
- 1.2. Digital connectivity is vital to support the objectives of local authorities in Cumbria as this infrastructure supports delivery of services, education, business, leisure and social inclusion. Therefore, over the past 15 years there have been a number of initiatives to encourage telecoms investment and augment this with publicly funded investment to help the county catch-up with the connectivity in the wider UK. The Digital Champions for Cumberland Council, Cllr Chris Southward, and Westmorland and Furness Council, Cllr Peter Thornton, assisted by the Connecting Cumbria team, are responsible for delivering the Cumbria-wide Digital Infrastructure Strategy which includes a strong focus on the expansion of gigabit capable broadband services.
- 1.3. In March 2021, UK Government announced the Project Gigabit programme, managed by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), with a commitment of up to £5 billion in funding, to expand gigabit broadband services through:
 - Encourage competition and investment into gigabit capable infrastructure through the commercial telecoms market. Seeking to encourage maximum delivery at the maximum possible speed across the UK.
 - Deploy gigabit capable services to all GP surgeries, libraries and primary schools.
 - Fund gigabit vouchers to support rural community projects.
 - Contract for delivery of gigabit connectivity to areas where commercial deployment is not planned
- 1.4. Across Cumbria there is significant commercially funded roll out of gigabit capable broadband with the majority of this work focused in urban areas. Work is also progressing, both as a result of the commercial deployment programme and some programmes managed through the Departments of Health or Education, on expansion of connectivity to GP surgeries, libraries and primary schools. Applications for new community voucher projects were paused by DSIT in 2023 but areas where a community project had already been agreed work is ongoing using this funding and top up funding provided through the Connecting Cumbria Voucher Top Up scheme.

- 1.5. With respect to contracted delivery, in November 2022 a contract was awarded by Building Digital UK (BDUK), an executive agency of DSIT which manages the Project Gigabit contracts, to Fibrus Limited for delivery of gigabit connectivity to areas where commercial deployment was not planned. As of March 2025 over 10,000 properties are able to order services as a result of the works under the contract and work is expected to accelerate through the course of the next 18 months. All works under the contract were expected to be finished in 2026. However, BDUK and Fibrus have recently agreed the addition of further properties into the contract and because of the additional works needed it is expected that deployment will extend to the end of 2027.
- 1.6. Subject to the completion of all Project Gigabit programme activity in Cumbria and all declared commercial deployment activity it is predicted that circa 97% of properties in Cumbria will be able to access gigabit broadband. Work is ongoing between the Connecting Cumbria team and DSIT to seek to understand policy and intervention options for the last 3% of properties in Cumbria. Solutions may include support for community self-build, Low Earth Orbit satellite or external antennas for 4G broadband.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Committee:

- I. **Notes the progress of full fibre broadband rollout by a range of networks across Cumbria.**
- II. **Advocates for continued investment in digital infrastructure to support local communities and businesses through the Digital Infrastructure Strategy.**

2. Background

- 2.1. Digital connectivity is vital to support the objectives of local authorities in Cumbria as this infrastructure supports delivery of services, education, business, leisure and social inclusion. High levels of rurality, low population density and challenging geography has meant that Cumbria has struggled to attract the same levels of commercial telecoms investment as more urban areas of the UK. Therefore, over the past 15 years there have been a number of initiatives to encourage telecoms investment and augment this with publicly funded investment to help the county catch-up with the connectivity in the wider UK.
- 2.2. In 2012 the initial phase of the Connecting Cumbria programme was agreed between Cumbria County Council and BT Plc to expand superfast broadband (of at least 30Mbps download) across Cumbria; today these services are available to 95.7% of properties in the county. To build on the success of the superfast broadband work a Digital Infrastructure Strategy was developed - [Digital Infrastructure Strategy | Connecting Cumbria](#). The current strategy runs from 2020 to 31st December 2025.

Digital Infrastructure Strategy 2020 to 31st December 2025

- 2.3. The Digital Champions for Cumberland Council, Cllr Chris Southward, and Westmorland and Furness Council, Cllr Peter Thornton, assisted by the Connecting Cumbria team, are responsible for delivering the Cumbria-wide Digital Infrastructure Strategy. Connecting Cumbria is hosted by Cumberland Council and overseen by the Connecting Cumbria Governance Board which includes senior officers for both Councils and both Digital Champions.
- 2.4. The focus of the Digital Infrastructure Strategy is to maximise deployment of full fibre and mobile infrastructure, which generally relies upon access to full fibre for mast backhaul. Priorities for investment are currently identified as providing connectivity to all residents and businesses in Cumbria, either through supporting commercial deployments, or working with central government to secure funding where intervention is required to ensure that **no one and no place is left behind**.
- 2.5. The Connecting Cumbria team are currently undertaking a number of activities to progress the aims of the Digital Infrastructure Strategy, including:
 - 2.5.1. Monitoring and supporting roll out of gigabit broadband through both commercial programmes and the Project Gigabit contract. Gigabit broadband can be delivered through a range of technologies but in most cases it is delivered through full fibre technology. The Project Gigabit contract was awarded by BDUK, an executive agency of DSIT, to Fibrus in December 2022 and is expected to run until the end of 2027. Subject to completion of planned works gigabit coverage is expected to be available to circa 97% of properties in Cumbria.

- 2.5.2. Monitoring and supporting expansion of 4G coverage in Cumbria through the Shared Rural Network (SRN) and Emergency Services Network (ESN) programmes. The SRN programme across the UK is split between a £532m commercial investment in partially covered areas and £500m of public investment in total not spots. Most new build in the ESN programme will become part of the SRN.
- 2.5.3. Working with Planning and Development on proposals for policies to encourage developers to work with broadband and mobile infrastructure providers to meet the needs of new or expanding communities.
- 2.5.4. Provide support and expertise to the development and running of projects under the digital theme of the Borderlands Growth Deal.
- 2.5.5. Delivery of the Borderlands 5G Innovation Region programme – not funded by Growth Deal but integrated into the partnership – which is looking at delivery and development of self-sustaining models for private 5G connectivity and use cases for rural tourism. The initial deployment area in Cumbria is at Windermere Ferry Nab.
- 2.6. To aid in the above work the Connecting Cumbria team meet regularly with suppliers delivering full fibre broadband into the county, mobile phone infrastructure delivery programmes and the Home Office team delivering the SRN in total not spot areas.
- 2.7. The Connecting Cumbria team, under the direction of the Connecting Cumbria Governance Board, reports progress into the Cumbria Joint Executive Committee and other corporate reporting for both Cumberland Council and Westmorland and Furness Council. Information is also shared on an as requested basis with Members of both Cumberland Council and Westmorland and Furness Council, MPs and other stakeholders.
- 2.8. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the programme, as of March 2025, are:

	Cumbria	Cumberland	Westmorland & Furness	UK
Percentage of properties that have gigabit capable broadband coverage of at least 1,000Mbps download	69.3%	64.7%	74.5%	86.8%
Percentage of properties that have broadband coverage of at least 30Mbps download	95.7%	95.0%	95.9%	98.3%
Percentage of properties that have broadband coverage of <10Mbps download	2.4%	2.5%	2.2%	0.7%
Percentage of 4G outdoor geographic coverage from all four Mobile Network Operators (MNO)	75.8%	75.3%	76.1%	80.0%

When comparing the above four areas – Cumbria, Cumberland, Westmorland and Furness and the UK – it is worth noting the following points:

- The most significant contribution to areas of coverage, fixed line and mobile, is from commercial investment into urban areas where deployment costs are relatively low, ongoing maintenance costs are forecast to be low and there is a dense resident population of people in the age range 18-45 (many companies target areas with a high proportion of online gamer account registrations) which indicates a strong return on investment. The market focus on London, Birmingham, Manchester and other major cities is understood to contribute most of the initial 80% of the current 86.8% UK gigabit coverage.
- In Cumbria we currently have higher gigabit coverage in Westmorland and Furness due to early deployment by commercial programmes, Openreach in particular, with a lot of activity being focused in Barrow, Kendal, Penrith and other market towns. In addition, deployment by B4RN is almost exclusively in Westmorland and Furness. We are expecting that the coverage in Cumberland will catch

up over the next 12 months as more of the current commercial deployment in Carlisle completes and we see more expansion to the larger communities on the west coast.

- Much of the coverage reported for properties that are able to access at least 30Mbps (superfast) is related to deployment of Fibre to the Cabinet technology. This hybrid fibre approach is most effective in dense clusters of properties which are within 1km of the network cabinet therefore the technology has been more effective in urban areas of the UK than in the rural areas of Cumbria.
- Properties with speeds below 30Mbps in the wider UK are likely to still be relatively close to a network structure thus able to access speeds of at least 10Mbps. However, in Cumbria, Wales and Scotland there is a high level of sparsely distributed properties that can only benefit from fibre in the core network if they are connected to full fibre. This means that while UK wide there may only be 0.7% of properties, circa 250,000, unable to access basic broadband there is a higher proportion of properties in Cumbria in this category. It is anticipated that a number of these sub 10Mbps properties in Cumbria can be addressed using full fibre technology, through the existing programmes or development of community voucher schemes, but where properties are very isolated (such as fell side farms) alternative technology will need to be considered.
- 4G mobile geographic coverage targets, agreed between Ofcom and each MNO as part of their licensing conditions, are more likely to be delivered first in areas where that MNO will see a return on investment and face less obstacles to deployment. Urban areas and near urban areas, especially in large cities, therefore, attract investment and result in greater overlapping geographic coverage across the UK relative to the coverage delivered in Cumbria. Cumbria is also considered to be a challenging place for planning approvals for this type of infrastructure deployment with two national parks and a perceived high resistance to mast deployment. There is also an expectations from MNOs that operating and maintenance costs in rural areas, combined with a low resident population will mean that such infrastructure would run at a loss with return on investment seen as unlikely. Engagement with public funded mast deployment programmes has been challenging due to the difficulty in agreeing running costs for MNOs using such masts.

3. Full Fibre Deployment and Project Gigabit

3.1. In March 2021, UK Government announced the Project Gigabit programme with a commitment of up to £5 billion in funding, to expand gigabit broadband services across the UK through:

- Encourage competition and investment into gigabit capable infrastructure through the commercial telecoms market. Seeking to encourage maximum delivery at the maximum possible speed across the UK.
- Deploy gigabit capable services to all GP surgeries, libraries and primary schools.
- Fund gigabit vouchers to support rural community projects.
- Contract for delivery of gigabit connectivity to areas where commercial deployment is not planned.

3.2. Commercial Telecoms Market

3.2.1. The commercial market for gigabit broadband and deployment of the full fibre infrastructure has significantly expanded over the past few years UK wide. Openreach and Virgin Media remain the most extensive networks across the UK but there are also a large number of broadband network builders active in deploying competing full fibre networks and in Cumbria - there are at least seven separate gigabit capable networks being deployed. This deployment activity are collectively expected to provide connectivity across circa 200,000 properties predominantly in Carlisle, market towns and some larger villages. Fibrus Ltd, closely followed by Openreach, has the largest commercial deployment programme announced currently in the county.

3.2.2. These commercial deployments, which may over-build each other, are typically focused in Carlisle and market towns. Some of the commercial deployments use Openreach Physical Infrastructure Access (PIA) agreements to install their fibre networks into ducting and poles previously installed by Openreach but in some cases this is not possible or appropriate. Where PIA is not available, or a broadband network deployment programme chooses not to use it, commercial deployment programmes will install their own physical infrastructure.

- 3.3. Deploy gigabit capable services to all GP surgeries, libraries and primary schools. Across Cumbria 464 locations fall into this part of Project Gigabit programme with 50% of these able to access gigabit connectivity currently with the coverage level expected to increase to circa 95%; subject to completion of declared commercial plans and the Project Gigabit contract. Through commercial telecoms deployment to urban areas many GPs, libraries and schools have been covered by gigabit services but there have also been a number of interventions on behalf of the NHS and Department for Education that have been managed through DSIT. A breakdown is provided below of the coverage achieved and predicted at the different types of locations.

	Cumbria	Cumberland	Westmorland and Furness
GP Surgeries	153	71	82
Gigabit Current	45%	53.5%	37.8%
Gigabit Expected	94%	95.8%	92.7%
Libraries	34	24	10
Gigabit Current	52%	50%	60%
Gigabit Expected	97%	95.8%	100%
Primary Schools	277	150	127
Gigabit Current	52%	46.7%	59.1%
Gigabit Expected	96%	98%	95.3%

3.4. Gigabit vouchers

The DSIT Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, which pre-dates that wider Project Gigabit Programme, was integrated into Project Gigabit in March 2021, the following figures only relate to voucher activity after March 2021. There have been:

- 3,012 Project Gigabit Broadband Vouchers from the DSIT scheme taken up in Cumbria.
- 1,190 of these vouchers have received top up funding, from the Borderlands Gigabit Voucher Top Up scheme or the Cumbria Gigabit Voucher Top Up scheme (which replaced the Borderlands Top Up in May 2022), providing over of £2.4m of additional support to connect properties with speeds below 30Mbps download.

DSIT chose to suspend applications for new community voucher projects under the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme in Cumbria in 2023, to allow more efficient delivery through the Project Gigabit contract. The Connecting Cumbria team is currently lobbying DSIT to reopen the community project application process for vouchers to provide a route forward for properties that are not able to be reached through the Project Gigabit Contract or are in areas where commercial deployment programmes have shrunk. Of the £2m allocated to the Cumbria Gigabit Voucher Top Up scheme in May 2022, £1.35m of funding is remaining to support top ups of future vouchers across Cumbria.

3.5. Project Gigabit Contract

3.5.1. In November 2022, a contract was awarded by BDUK, the executive agency of DSIT which manages the Project Gigabit contracts, to Fibrus Limited for delivery of gigabit connectivity to areas where commercial deployment was not planned. Work by Fibrus on this contract is in parallel but separate from their commercially funded works which are typically focused in urban areas. Cumbria was the first area covered by this type of regional contract (referred to as a Type B contract) and is one of the earliest areas within the UK where these types of works commenced. Local Authorities are not parties to the contract but provide essential support for maximising deployment and 'barrier busting'. Infrastructure deployed under the contract must be available to offer services on a wholesale basis, the wholesale product is sold under the brand name Hyperfast GB, and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) which include Fibrus and others offer packages for customers using this wholesale offering.

3.5.2. Public funding may only be targeted at properties in areas of market failure. BDUK establishes which properties are in areas of market failure through a rolling Open Market Review (OMR) which all broadband providers are encouraged to submit information to about their current and planned networks. Of the properties that may legally be targeted with public funding, Fibrus provides a list of properties in their bid to BDUK and this target list of properties are the basis of the contract. This means that not all properties that are eligible to be targeted with public funding will be included in the contract. Fibrus are only paid under the contract for targeting the agreed properties but are able to use their own funding to target non contracted properties that are in

proximity to the network if they choose to do so. It is understood that this contract mechanism has allowed the contract to target more remote properties than it would have otherwise.

3.5.3. Members will have noted that since 2022, there has been a large increase in telecoms related work on the highways. While a lot of such works are in urban areas, works under the Project Gigabit contract are required to work on many smaller routes in order to target the contracted rural properties. On such small routes there is often a need to undertake road closures, even for survey works, in order to comply with highways safe working regulations. In order to support the same delivery of works under the Project Gigabit contract the Highways and Streetworks teams for both Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness Councils are engaging regularly with Fibrus. The Connecting Cumbria team has also appointed two Fibre Streetworks Compliance Officers to work with broadband networks deploying in Cumbria to aid these companies in developing pragmatic and compliant work plans. There have been health and safety issues raised with Fibrus in relations to a small percentage of their overall works and Fibrus is working with both Streetworks teams as well as their contractors to resolve and avoid the reoccurrence of issues.

3.5.4. As of March 2025 over 10,000 properties are able to order services as a result of the works under the Project Gigabit contract and work is expected to accelerate through the course of the next 18 months. All works under the contract were expected to be finished in 2026. However, BDUK and Fibrus have recently agreed the addition of further properties into the contract and because of the additional works needed it is expected that deployment will extend to the end of 2027.

3.6. Last 1% and Very Hard to Reach Properties

Subject to the completion of all Project Gigabit programme activity in Cumbria and all declared commercial deployment activity it is predicted that circa 99% of properties in Cumbria will be able to access gigabit broadband. There are estimated to be 8,000 properties which are expected to need development of additional market intervention to support them in accessing gigabit capable services. Work is ongoing between the Connecting Cumbria team and DSIT to seek to reopen the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme to new projects which could support many of the properties in this situation to work with their community to access improved services. DSIT are working on a national policy for delivery of services under the Project Gigabit programme to the most challenging 0.3% of properties in the UK and some of Cumbria's last 3% properties will need to be supported under this policy. Solutions under the Very Hard to Reach policy may include support for community self-build, Low Earth Orbit satellite or external antennas for 4G broadband. It should be noted however that DSIT have not so far been able to provide a timescale for the development of policy or solutions.

4. Mobile Coverage

4.1. The focus of this paper is on the delivery of gigabit broadband but mobile connectivity is a key service for digital connectivity around the county. The Connecting Cumbria team is working to monitor and support the delivery of the Government's Shared Rural Network and Emergency Services Network programmes which are seeking to expand 4G coverage across the UK through a £1bn investment. This programme is made up of £500m of public funding for total not spot areas and £532m by mobile network operators for partial not spot areas. The Connecting Cumbria team is continuing to monitor these programmes and look at ways to encourage investment to improve mobile connectivity across Cumbria

5. Proposals

Report is for Information.

6. Alternative options considered

Report is for Information.

7. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

The progress so far on the rollout of full fibre broadband is a significant step towards a more digitally connected Cumbria. Ongoing monitoring and support of the roll-out and continued collaboration with providers will be essential to maximise the benefits for all residents and businesses.

Implications: Report is for Information.

Contribution to the Cumberland Plan Priorities

Cumberland Council's vision is that it takes a fresh approach to the delivery of inclusive services that are shared by residents and communities. By enabling positive outcomes for health and wellbeing, prosperity and the environment, it is possible to fulfil the potential of people and area. The Council believes passionately in the delivery of excellent public services, and in order to this it is essential to be clear about the values and behaviours needed to drive change and achieve high standards. Improvement in digital connectivity is essential to support Cumberland Council's priorities and ambitions.

Contribution to the Westmorland and Furness Plan Priorities -

Westmorland and Furness vision is to be 'a great place to live, work and thrive' and will work collaboratively with partners, communities, and residents to deliver the best outcomes for all.

The Council's priority is for sustainable, inclusive, economic growth, with:

- opportunities for jobs, learning, skills and enterprise
- a sustainable, inclusive, diverse, economy
- a growing work force and high quality jobs
- support to encourage business creation
- improved infrastructure and connectivity

Improvement in digital connectivity is essential to support all of these priorities

Relevant Risks – Report is for Information.

Consultation / Engagement – Not required

Legal – There are no legal implications, as this report is provided for information and noting.

Finance – There are no Financial implications, the report is provided for information and noting.

Information Governance – Not required, the report is for information.

Impact Assessments – Not required, the report is for information.

Contact details:

Contact Officer: Jonathan Harris

Email: jonathan.harris@connectingcumbria.org.uk

Appendices attached to report: None

Background papers:

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government Act 1972 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers: Not required