

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTE of Special Meeting of the AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in Council Chambers, Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells on Wednesday, 21 November 2018 at 10.30 am

Present:- Councillors S. Bell (Chairman), H. Anderson, J. A. Fullarton, N. Richards, H. Scott and S. Scott

Apologies:- Councillors K. Chapman, S. Hamilton and E. Thornton-Nicol

Also Present:- Councillor M. Rowley

In Attendance:- Chief Officer Economic Development, Clerk to the Council, Trainee Democratic Services

1. CHAIRMAN

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised Members that Hayley Barnett had been appointed as the external member to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee and would attend the next meeting on 27 November 2018. He also advised that an item on the Broadband review would be included on that agenda.

DECISION

NOTED the appointment of Hayley Barnett to the Audit & Scrutiny Committee (Audit business only).

2. MINUTE

There had been circulated copies of the Special Audit and Scrutiny Committee Minute of 5 November 2018.

DECISION

APPROVED for signature by the Chairman.

3. REVIEW OF BROADBAND IMPROVEMENTS IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

3.1 Mr Bryan McGrath, Chief Officer Economic Development, gave a presentation on Broadband Improvements and Scottish Borders Council's role and involvement in the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband Programme (DSSB), which aimed to set out the Council's perspective in respect of Broadband and the strategic context. Mr McGrath spoke of the importance of digital connectivity for the economy of rural areas and the sense that rural areas were being left behind in this regard. In 2012, Scottish Borders and Dumfries & Galloway Councils were already working closely together through the South of Scotland Alliance and had agreed to make major capital allocations to support the South of Scotland Local Broadband Plan, aiming for at least 85% coverage. Mr McGrath referred to the Step Change 2015 Programme and that the Council had allocated £8.4m in its Capital Programme to help extend coverage to deliver improved superfast broadband across the Scottish Borders. It was important to note that the indicative 93.8% target was to have been met by the end of December 2017 and the figure reported as at 30 September 2018 was 93.7%. The programme monitoring was postcode based and did not target specific premises; this meant that coverage varied across the Scottish Borders and even for premises within the same postcode area. Mr McGrath explained that

'Exchange Only', 'Long Lines' and 'Copper Rearrangement' led to technical issues especially in rural areas. Mr McGrath then advised that a single point of contact for each Council was maintained for the DSSB programme, in particular for roads consents and planning applications, to allow for a quick and smooth process. Communication and publicity through press coverage, special events, broadband bus and appearances at local events was also a key element to ensure awareness of what was available and to encourage people to take up the new services. The Committee noted that customer frustration and uncertainty about Broadband was a common issue, with businesses and households uncertain when they might be able to access new services, but also uncertain about what level of improvement the new service would bring to them. However, the Local Authorities were hampered in terms of what information could be shared because of commercial confidentiality. Mr McGrath then gave details of Gainshare which was an important element of the contract. The contract was based on a take-up rate target of 20% for people upgrading to superfast broadband services with the most recent figure for Scottish Borders showing 44.2% take up. It was noted that the new R100 programme aimed to deliver superfast connectivity to 100% of premises by 2021.

- 3.2 Mr McGrath answered various questions raised by Members on the presentation, explaining that DSSB 'coverage' meant connected to the new infrastructure, but that did not necessarily mean improvement in service if premises were more than 1.2km away from the cabinet. While 'coverage' was 93.7%, speeds had not increased to the same level. With regard to split between the use of Gainshare and the Council's £8.4m to increase the infrastructure, this information had been requested from the DSSB team. The Chairman further advised that officers would draft a report on the Review for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee on 27 November 2018, with the report structured on the scope set out by the Executive Committee.

DECISION

AGREED that officers would include the following points in the draft report in terms of the scope of the Review:

- (a) the assessment of the final coverage delivered by Contract 1 of the DSSB Programme and the associated Gainshare project – the spirit of the contract had been delivered although there had been a lack of clarity on the what was meant by coverage;**
- (b) the quality of that coverage and any variations between premises in towns, villages and the countryside – postcode coverage; technical issues once the actual work started; exchange only lines; and long lines from cabinet to premises;**
- (c) how appropriate and effective the communication processes used during the roll-out were, and whether appropriate information sharing and openness was evident to all stakeholders throughout the programme – inhibited by the commercial confidentiality; the scale and complexity of the problems; the need for simple messages to the public to sign up to superfast broadband; and raised aspirations;**
- (d) did the Programme deliver appropriate value for money in relation to the Council's £8.4M investment – possibly, depended on % in Scottish Borders against that in other areas;**
- (e) how successful the take up of superfast broadband has been across the Scottish Borders – the numbers in the Scottish Borders compared to that nationally and how the numbers were spread across the Borders; and**
- (f) identify appropriate lessons for future programmes, such as the new R100 Programme – transparency and openness especially on difficulties or**

challenges encountered; a break in the contract if there was a significant change in technology; and any website should contain information on each premises within a postcode area.

The meeting concluded at 12.10 pm