

Wide Area Network

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1 Purpose of Report

This report provides an update of the progress made to implement the Service's own Wide Area Network and asks the Fire Authority to consider whether it wishes to commit further time and resources to exploring any opportunities this may offer.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to consider whether officers should continue to invest time and financial resources in commissioning professional support to explore the potential opportunities for exploiting the Service's information technology infrastructure.

3 Background

Members will recall that, due to unforeseen events in early 2014, the Service had to work quickly to establish an alternative Wide Area Network (WAN) to that previously supplied by Shropshire Council. The implementation date for the new network was 5 January 2015. Following the successful completion of that work the Service is now considering possible options for the enhanced capacity that this brings, both within the Service and potentially for the community.

4 Our Wide Area Network

Following completion of the WAN implementation project the Service now has a primary and secondary connection to each of its locations and to partner Fire and Rescue Services, providing the mechanism and resilience to mobilise resources to incidents, to cope in sparse conditions and to minimise network downtime.

The Service has the potential to increase the capacity of the new network easily. This helps with 'future proofing', at least in the medium term, by giving the capability to utilise advances in technology in support of operational response. This could, for example, involve the use of live video footage from incidents, in addition to the existing voice traffic assisting with incident command and resolution.

5 Opportunities for the Future

As part of Service transformation work, officers aim to use the enhanced capacity provided by the new WAN to support a range of internal technical developments to improve ways of working for staff. As well as incident-related information, there is a live project to deploy video conferencing across all of the Service's locations. This has the potential to improve communication; reduce the need for travel, for example for meetings; improve opportunities for remote working and create new possibilities for the way that we deliver training.

In terms of benefits beyond this organisation, officers are aware of the ongoing national broadband deployment programme, known as Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK), which aims to roll-out superfast broadband to 95% of premises in the UK by 2017. As currently, much of rural Shropshire sits outside that 95% of premises, officers are exploring whether it is possible to use the enhanced capability, generated by having locations and, therefore, network connections across the County, to offer connectivity, where there is no imminent prospect of this occurring.

In simple terms the Fire and Rescue Service may be able to support the roll-out of superfast broadband across the County of Shropshire, using new technologies, known as Next Generation Access alternatives (e.g. wireless broadband), supported by the WAN. In reality, procurement issues and state aid criteria mean that this is perhaps not appropriate for the Service at this point in time.

6 Progress and Impediments

Given that the BDUK programme aims to roll-out superfast broadband to 95% of premises, reaching the remaining 5% is receiving national attention. The remaining 5% of premises fall within the hardest to reach areas of the UK. To try to address this issue BDUK are currently running Market Test Pilots to explore the use of alternative technologies and means of delivery. Deployment of these pilots runs until March 2016 and evidence from them will be used to determine how to proceed to connect the remaining 5%.

The Service has an excellent working relationship with the current supplier, who has some experience of working on community support projects, including one currently being trialled through BDUK. The Service has also worked with Telford & Wrekin Legal Services to research this new and innovative area for a Fire and Rescue Service. Unfortunately, progress has been slow, as the issues are quite complex.

Officers have spoken to a unitary council, who have made some progress with alternative technologies but had to refrain from any link to their own WAN due to the restrictions created by the state aid rules.

State Aid

The following definition is taken from the BDUK state aid consultation document issued in January 2015.

The state aid rules require public intervention to be targeted so as to limit the risk of crowding-out or dis-incentivising existing and/or credible near future planned private sector investments that would otherwise meet the desired policy objectives. In the context of broadband, the State Aid rules require using qualifying public funding only to extend broadband coverage in geographic areas where there is no market provision of equitable broadband services. This includes both current provision and demonstrable credible plans to deploy services over the next three years.

In accordance with the EC decision on the National Broadband Scheme for the UK, BDUK has defined its proposed Next Generation Access (NGA) and Basic Broadband Intervention Areas to target NGA 'white' areas and Basic Broadband 'white' areas, respectively. Those categories are defined as follows:

- *'White' areas are those in which there is no qualifying broadband infrastructure and none is likely to be developed in the near future (within 3 years);*
- *'Grey' areas are those where one network operator has a qualifying presence and another qualifying network is unlikely to be developed in the near future; and*
- *'Black' areas are those where there are, or there will be in the near future, at least two qualifying network operators*

The categorisation is done separately for both basic broadband and superfast broadband.

Procurement

Procurement rules and detailed frameworks are difficult to navigate and mean that thorough research is essential. To date it has been difficult to identify the appropriate frameworks for the Service's circumstance.

In addition, officers are aware that Crown Commercial Services (CCS) is putting in place a pan-Government Agreement for connectivity and telecommunication services for use by public sector bodies. This Framework Agreement will facilitate the provision of innovative connectivity and telecommunications and other services for the UK public sector as a whole. It is envisaged that this will provide the mechanism for procuring the network services but unfortunately the deadline has been extended and is now due to be in place this month, June 2015, so officers are still awaiting further information about this framework.

In preparation, officers have looked to source external support and have identified that ESPO may be able to assist.

7 Conclusion

The situation is complex to navigate. The release of the Government Agreement may provide a helpful route through the market and officers will continue to look out for its release. It is clear, however, that external support, and funding for that support, will be necessary to assist officers in reaching a good understanding of any options for the Fire Authority to consider.

8 Financial Implications

Although there are potential financial implications arising from this report, these are unknown until more specific discussions have taken place following the release of the Government Framework.

9 Legal Comment

There are no immediate legal implications arising from this report. There will, however, be a number of complex, legal issues to be addressed in relation to issues around procurement, supplier contract negotiations / management and the development of agreements to support the roll-out of super-fast broadband to the wider community. Full legal advice will be taken, should further work be commissioned.

10 Initial Impact Assessment

This report asks for consideration of further research, after which an Initial Impact Assessment would be appropriate. An Initial Impact Assessment is not, therefore, required.

11 Equality Impact Assessment

There are no equality or diversity implications arising from this report. An Equality Impact Assessment is not, therefore, required.

12 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

13 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.