

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT NEWSLETTER

August 2023
Edition #2

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TEAM HERE TO OFFER SUPPORT TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The Aberdeen City Region is the fastest improving area in the UK, when using public subsidy to secure improved broadband connections. This update was presented to Councillors as part of Committee Meetings in June, where Aberdeenshire Council’s Digital Strategy was discussed, along with progress updates on various key projects, including the work of the Digital Engagement Team.

With results from projects such as the Reaching 100% Programme (R100), City Region Deal investment, Project Gigabit, and the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS), in which Aberdeenshire has the highest uptake of such vouchers, the region is seeing some of the fastest improving digital inclusion and digital connectivity in Scotland. The extensive community engagement being carried out by Council Officers has also been recognised.

Chair of the Business Services Committee, Cllr Mark Findlater, said: “This is such great news for Aberdeenshire Council and the wider region. We are at the forefront of using digital technology to improve our own processes and systems, but we are also charging ahead in helping connect the wider Aberdeenshire. Our digital aspirations are high but this report to committee shows that they are not unrealistic. We can use digital technology to deliver public services more efficiently and it is great that the officers working on these important bits of work are seeing such great progress already.”

Vice chair Cllr John Cox said: “It is so important that we have a plan to tackle digital exclusion. It can take many forms such as a lack of connectivity, technology or skills, but working to get as many people as possible in Aberdeenshire confidently active on digital platforms is a great ambition. I am pleased that there has been a lot of focus on this area.”

Digital Engagement Officer, Emma Stanford explained "The Digital Engagement Team are passionate in their ambition to support Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City communities. Through this work the region is already seeing improvements in connectivity in some of our hardest to reach areas. Alongside engagement with local Community Councils, the Digital Engagement Team are also keen to carry on working alongside local operators to plug the connectivity gaps in the region"

Although improvements may be present, there is still a huge opportunity to do more to improve the digital profile of the North East of Scotland. With over 20,000 premises across Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire still unable to obtain a superfast broadband connection of 30Mbps, the Digital Engagement Team is determined to support every single one of those premises to improve the digital connectivity of the region. By supporting the use of public subsidy, by working with telecoms operators to support their networks, by working with communities to explore wider solutions, and by working closely with colleagues in all levels of Government, the Team is unwavering in their ambitions. We strongly encourage any resident, business or community to contact the team for advice and support in seeking improved digital connections.



REACHING 100% & SCOTTISH BROADBAND VOUCHER SCHEME

The Reaching 100% Programme, often referred to as the R100, is continuing at pace. Openreach, as the infrastructure provider of the Scottish Government programme, have connected nearly 100 properties in the last month around Oldmeldrum, Kemnay and Inch. This brings the current total to 3,011 premises being connected to full-fibre broadband through R100, providing these residents with access to gigabit capable broadband, and a host of new opportunities in engaging in the digital world. There is still a fair journey ahead, with a further 12,740 premises due to be connected to full-fibre by 2028, when the programme is due to be completed.

Beside the contracted build plans by Openreach, the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) continues to provide up to £5,000 subsidy for premises which will not see future infrastructure improvements, and cannot currently obtain superfast broadband speeds (30Mbps). 760 premises across Aberdeen City & Aberdeenshire have now been supported to use their voucher, and have access to new, faster broadband. However, with nearly 9,000 more vouchers available across the Region, there is still a huge opportunity to improve the digital connectivity for many residents. You can check your own property's status in the Reaching 100% Programme by using the postcode checker online at www.scotlandsuperfast.com.

Digital connectivity is more important now than it has ever been. The Digital Engagement Team within Aberdeenshire Council is ready, able and eager to support every single resident who needs it, in finding and accessing improved broadband connectivity, and is abreast of all the different forms of support available, including R100 and SBVS. We work closely with telecoms operators of all sizes, and have strong relationships with numerous key stakeholders.

For tailored support for your property, please contact the Digital Engagement Team at:

digitalengagement@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.

PROJECT GIGABIT

Project Gigabit is the overarching £5billion programme from UK Government, aiming to close the digital divide by improving digital connectivity across the UK, bringing gigabit capable connections to as many residents and premises as possible. In Scotland, the most recognisable arm of Project Gigabit was the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS), providing up to £4,500 of subsidy to obtain a gigabit broadband connection, for premises which would not see improvements either from commercial expansion, or publicly funded upgrades. These vouchers could also be used in conjunction with the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) of £5,000, meaning some properties could have up to £9,500 of subsidy to secure a better broadband connection. Across the Aberdeen City Region, approximately 500 GBVS vouchers have now been utilised, with a further 100 issued and awaiting completion.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government carried out lengthy market engagement through an Open Market Review (OMR), to gauge interest from the telecoms industry on what Project Gigabit may look like in Scotland, and to better understand where existing commercial plans would reach, so as to best identify the parts of Scotland in most need of further support. Following the OMR, a Public Review (PR) was launched, seeking further information and responses from suppliers, businesses, public sector partners and various other stakeholders. With both these processes now closed, Scottish and UK Governments are working together to determine the best procurement process for Project Gigabit in Scotland. We expect to hear announcements on this in Autumn of this year. Following the same process as other parts of the UK, now that Project Gigabit is moving to a procurement phase in Scotland, the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme has been paused, hindering any new applications.

In April, the UK Government launched an £8 million fund to provide capital grants to further promote new satellite connectivity to a small cohort of up to 35,000 of the very hardest to reach premises. Because of the rurality of some parts of Aberdeenshire, it is very likely that some properties in the region will fall into this Very Hard to Reach category. Final details on the grants, and the application process is still to be determined, and we are hopeful that more information will be provided along with the Project Gigabit procurement announcements later in the year.

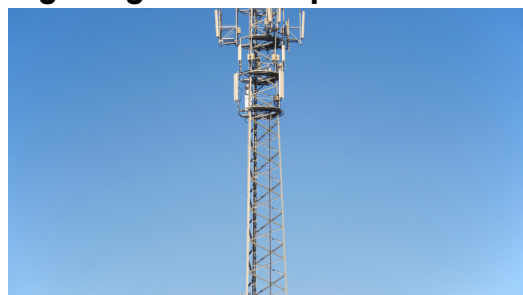
A full update on Project Gigabit across the UK can be found on www.gov.uk with a link here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/project-gigabit-progress-update-june-2023>



MOBILE CONNECTIVITY UPDATES

With most people engaging with the digital world via a smart phone or tablet, and with the need for adequate mobile phone coverage in rural areas becoming all the more evident, it is essential that we support the improvements in mobile connectivity in the North East of Scotland. In 2022, we saw some positive impact in publicly funded and supported initiatives, through the Scottish 4G Infill Programme, which resulted in two new 4G masts in Aberdeenshire: one at Collieston, and one at Bogton, Turriff. These masts, both operated by EE, have brought significant improvements to areas once poorly served by 4G mobile connectivity.

Moving forward, the Shared Rural Network (SRN) is seeing strong collaboration between the UK Government and all four Mobile Network Operators of the UK (EE, O2, Three & Vodafone), striving to plug 4G notspots and increase the availability of multiple networks where only one network may have previously been available.



All of the Mobile Network Operators are reporting on their work, showing great strides towards improved 4G connectivity across Scotland.

- O2 reported in June that they have progress with at least 50 sites in Scotland.
- Vodafone reported in July they now have 49 new sites in Scotland supported by the SRN. Three reported most recently that of their 100 new SRN sites, 65 are in Scotland.
- EE have reported on 1,500 new and upgraded mast locations across the UK, but do not specify how many in Scotland.

What does that look like for the Aberdeen City Region? There is note of 7 new masts being built in Aberdeenshire, aiming to target rural areas to increase 4G coverage. Residents near Pennan, Rhyndy, Birse, Finzean, Tornaveen, Fetteresso and Braemar should benefit from these new masts and upgrades.

As we anticipate the implementation of the Shared Rural Network in North East Scotland, we can look forward to benefits that can transform the region. Geographic coverage of 4G from at least one MNO, will increase from 86% to 94%, with the building of new masts, and improved infrastructure. Additionally, the geographic percentage where all four MNO's provide coverage will increase from 59% to 79%, as MNO's upgrade their existing infrastructure, and work closer together to share masts and infrastructure space.

More information can be found on the Shared Rural Network website, here:

<https://srn.org.uk/>



LOCAL VIEW

Slow broadband is an all too common frustration for residents of rural Aberdeenshire. Through the Scottish Government's Reaching 100% (R100) programme, improvements are coming, with over 16,000 premises in Aberdeenshire being connected to full-fibre broadband infrastructure in the coming years.

Mr. Hadley, a resident of rural Deeside, contacted the Digital Engagement Team with frustration around his 1Mbps broadband speeds. With access to property-level information and data, Mr. Hadley was informed that his property will definitely be receiving a full-fibre connection as part of the R100 programme.

With a few years still to wait for this improvement, the Digital Engagement Team worked with Mr. Hadley to find the best solution for better broadband now, using Government support programmes, and a network of contacts in the telecoms industry.

Mr Hadley said "I hadn't expected not to have a decent Broadband connection when we moved to a more rural location last year. I pursued BT's Universal Service Objective commitment, but the cost of a one-off Fibre installation was prohibitive (£150k!) Tearing my hair out, I was guided to the Aberdeenshire Digital Engagement team, who invested significant time understanding my particular issues – and then made a series of recommendations for me to choose a preferred provider/service. I now have a pretty reliable 4G Broadband service giving me 50mbps download speeds – that's a miraculous improvement!"



MOVE TO DIGITAL VOICE - PSTN RETIREMENT

The retirement of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) in the United Kingdom marks a milestone in the development of communication infrastructure. Technological advancements have rendered the PSTN, the traditional circuit-switched network responsible for landline phone communication, outdated and inefficient. This has led to a concerted effort to transition towards more modern and versatile alternatives.

The decision to retire the PSTN is driven by a multitude of factors. Firstly, the rise of digital communication technologies, such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), offers greater flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and a broader range of features compared to the PSTN. VoIP services leverage the internet to transmit voice data, allowing for integrated multimedia communication across various devices.

Moreover, the maintenance and operation of the aging PSTN infrastructure has become increasingly costly and cumbersome. As more people shift towards mobile phones and internet-based communication, the demand for traditional landline services has waned significantly. This, coupled with the benefits of newer technologies, has prompted service providers to invest in the transition to more modern networks.

While the retirement of the PSTN promises numerous advantages, challenges lie ahead. One primary concern is ensuring a seamless migration process for users who still rely on landline services. Special attention must be given to rural and remote areas where internet connectivity might not be as robust. Additionally, ensuring the resilience of telecoms in the event of power cuts, continues to be a key concern for many rural communities in Aberdeenshire.

The retirement of the PSTN in the UK reflects the dynamic nature of technological progress and its impact on communication infrastructure. As the nation embraces more innovative and adaptable communication systems like VoIP, it opens the door to a future marked by enhanced connectivity, cost savings, and a wider array of features. However, careful planning and consideration are essential to navigate potential challenges and ensure a smooth transition for all users. It is for these reasons that the Digital Engagement Team is ready and eager to support any community, business or resident, with any concerns or queries they may have regarding the PSTN retirement, and we welcome any correspondence to digitalengagement@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.

More information on the retirement of the PSTN can be found at Future of Voice, here:
www.futureofvoice.co.uk

OPERATOR SPOTLIGHT

Each month the Digital Engagement Team invite local operators to share information and updates on their business.

Scot-Tel-Gould (STG) has been a trusted supplier for super-fast broadband to local authorities such as Aberdeenshire Council, businesses, and households in the Grampian region for over 10 years.

Utilising a comprehensive network of wireless and fibre connections STG provides broadband to towns and villages across the whole region. This network has continued to grow and now supports over 50,000 people and continues to extend broadband connectivity to remote homes and businesses. STG specialises in connecting 'difficult to access' locations, revolutionising how business operate and giving residents the ability to work from home.

Over the past couple of years STG has successfully delivered R100 projects throughout Aberdeenshire. This initiative has effectively brought high-speed broadband to various local communities, including but not limited to Bogton, Forglen Estate, Mill of Colpy, Bulwark, Glen Tanar Estate, Inverey and Finzean Estate.

This year STG was an official sponsor and internet provider to The Turriff Show which is the biggest two-day agricultural show in Scotland. STG had a stand at the show to promote the SBVS voucher scheme and to showcase fixed wireless technologies which can help deliver high-speed broadband to remote locations.



Contact information:

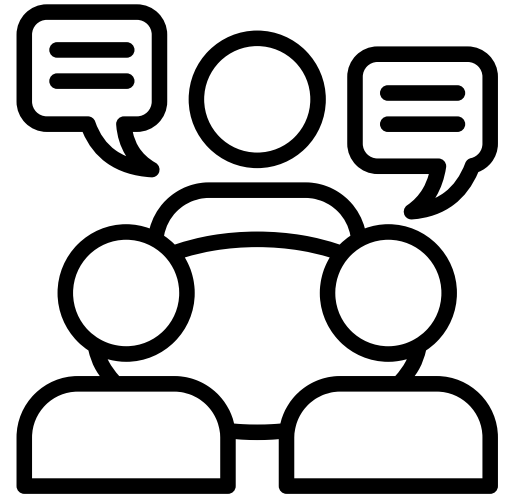
E: info@scot-tel-gould.co.uk

P: 01224 471 335

W: www.scot-tel-gould.co.uk

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TEAM JOURNAL

As the summer rolled on, and the great Scottish weather played its part, the Digital Engagement Team continued to actively support residents across the region. The team had 35 direct enquiries in the month of July to handle, which involved supporting 60 premises in accessing better broadband connectivity solutions. 63% of the enquiries were resolved in month with a positive outcome. Additionally, some of the highlights from the last month include;



- A series of events and briefings for members of the public, elected members, and key stakeholders, to inform and support communities in Aberdeen City Centre, as part of the Fibre Community Partnership approach by Openreach, to upgrade the Denburn Telephone Exchange area. This project is aiming to engage with 350 residents, tenants and business owners, to build a project led by public demand.
- Aberdeenshire Council's Digital Engagement Team has been supporting four other Local Authorities to replicate the workstream and success being seen in the North East of Scotland, by sharing best practices and giving some insight into how the team was created, and is funded.
- After attending a Strathdon Community Development Trust Board Meeting, the Digital Engagement Team has seen a spike in enquiries and enthusiasm coming from this rural community, spurring our focus on finding the best possible connectivity solutions for this area.
- In an effort to support Council tenants across Aberdeenshire, the Digital Engagement Team have started a piece of work looking at Multi-Dwelling-Unit (MDU) access, in an effort to find the best way forward for tenants of Council blocks to obtain full-fibre broadband. This work spans various Council departments and is being progressed in discussion with Openreach.

CALL TO ARMS

We all understand that access to reliable and fast digital connectivity is no longer a luxury but a necessity. It has become a vital lifeline that connects us to essential services, educational opportunities, economic growth, and social interactions. However, many residents still face challenges when it comes to digital connectivity. It is important to raise your voices and actively engage with one another to advocate for improved digital infrastructure.

The digital divide continues to impact individuals, families, and businesses in our area, limiting our potential and hindering progress. But we have the power to change that. By joining forces and making our voices heard, we can encourage key stakeholders to prioritise digital connectivity and take tangible steps towards bridging the gap.

[So, how can you make a difference?](#)

- **Contact Your Local Council:** Reach out to the Digital Engagement Team directly, and express your concerns about the state of digital connectivity in your community. Share personal stories and highlight the impact it has on your daily life, education, and business endeavours. Help us to prioritise improving digital infrastructure and expanding coverage in underserved areas.



- **Form Community Alliances:** Join forces with fellow residents, community groups, and local businesses who share the same concerns. Together, organise meetings, petitions, or awareness campaigns to bring attention to the issue and amplify our collective voice. A united front will have a greater impact on the decision-making processes.
- **Stay Informed:** Stay up to date with local council meetings, discussions, and initiatives related to digital connectivity. Attend public forums and consultations to voice your concerns and contribute to the decision-making process. Being informed allows us to engage effectively and make a more significant impact.

Remember, change begins with us all. Let's take action and work together to ensure that every community's digital connectivity needs are met. By contacting the Digital Engagement Team and advocating for better digital infrastructure, we can empower ourselves and future generations to thrive in the interconnected world.

THE MONTH AHEAD

What's coming up in the month ahead to be aware of in Digital Connectivity?

Some dates to be aware of:

- **15th August** – The Digital Engagement Team is attending the Fyvie, Rothienorman & Monquhitter Community Council to provide local information and support in matters relating to digital connectivity
- **31st August** – Representatives from the Digital Engagement Team will be attending the Senior Leaders Cyber Summit at Robert Gordon's University, to explore how the Local Authority can best support this growing sector
- **31st August** – Scottish Government colleagues will be hosting their Quarterly Digital Connectivity Event for Local Authorities, giving the Digital Engagement Team the opportunity to get updates and ask questions across a range of topics.
- **14th September** – DigiGov North Conference in Manchester, bringing together representatives from all levels of Government, business and industry, to promote digital, data and technology in the public sector.
- **TBC** – The Digital Engagement Team has been invited to attend the Meldrum, Bourtie & Daviot Community Council on a date to be confirmed.

In addition to dates for the diary, the Digital Engagement Team is focusing on the following key areas in the month ahead:

- **Continuing to work with Telecoms Operators to advance a project utilising Aberdeenshire Council assets to expand and install new connectivity infrastructure.**
- **Further engaging with the community around Strathdon, to further develop plans and ideas on the best connectivity solutions for this rural area.**



DIRECTORY

There are a number of operators in and around Aberdeenshire, some of which are R100 and/or Gigabit registered. Their details can be found below:

Supplier Name	Website	Full Fibre	Fixed Wireless	Fixed Mobile	Satellite
Assured Telecoms Ltd	https://www.assuredtelecoms.co.uk/	Yes			
Bentley Walker	https://bentley-walker.com/			Yes	Yes
Converged Rural Broadband	www.crb.scot	Yes	Yes		
Cerberus Networks Ltd.	https://www.cerberusnetworks.co.uk/	Yes			
Converged Communication Solutions Ltd.	https://converged.co.uk/	Yes			Yes
External Reality Ltd.	https://externalreality.co.uk/	Yes		Yes	
Fibairo	https://www.fibairo.com/	Yes	Yes		
Fibre 1	https://fibre1.uk/	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Flexifi	https://flexifi.co.uk/	Yes		Yes	Yes
Formartinet	http://formartinet.co.uk/		Yes		
GoFibre	https://gofibre.co.uk/	Yes	Yes		
IFB	https://www.ifb.net/	Yes		Yes	
Leisure Connect	https://www.myleisureconnect.co.uk/	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Marykirk.com	https://www.marykirk.com/	Yes	Yes		
National Broadband	https://www.national-broadband.co.uk/			Yes	
Northsat Ltd	http://www.northsat.co.uk/		Yes	Yes	Yes
Not Spot Broadband	https://notspotbroadband.com/	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Openreach	https://www.openreach.com/	Yes			
Rural Communications	https://www.rural-communications.com/	Yes	Yes	Yes	

DIRECTORY

Supplier Namer	Website	Full Fibre	Fixed Wireless	Fixed Mobile	Satellite
Scotnet.co.uk Ltd	https://www.scotnet.co.uk/	Yes	Yes		
Scot-Tel-Gould Ltd	https://www.scot-tel-gould.co.uk/index.html	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Starlink	https://www.starlink.com/				Yes
Transmitair Ltd / Rapier Systems Ltd.	https://transmitair.com/	Yes	Yes	Yes	
UltraNetworks Ltd	https://www.ultranetworks.co.uk/	Yes	Yes		
WiFab	https://www.wifab.co.uk			Yes	

Below you will also find a number of useful websites in relation to Digital Connectivity:

Name	Website
R100	https://www.scotlandsuperfast.com
Shared Rural Network (SRN)	https://srn.org.uk/
Ofcom	https://www.ofcom.org.uk/home
PSTN	https://www.futureofvoice.co.uk
Openreach Fibre Community Partnership	https://www.openreach.com/fibre-broadband/fibre-community-partnership
Project Gigabit	https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/



CONTACT US

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Website: www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/business/business-support/communities/digital-connectivity/