DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT NEWSLETTER

September 2023
Edition #3

DIGITAL WORKSTREAM THROUGH THE ABERDEEN CITY REGION DEAL

The Aberdeen City Region Deal (ACRD) is a partnership between Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Opportunity North East, Scottish Government and UK Government. The Deal is one delivery mechanism for the regional economic strategy and is investing in sector innovation projects and infrastructure to support economic diversification and resilience. Signed in November 2016, both Governments committed to jointly investing up to £250 million over a 10-year period. These commitments form part of an overarching £826 million funding package for the Aberdeen City Region Deal.

Within the Aberdeen City Region Deal, the Digital Workstream encompasses innovative and exciting projects, including the provision of full-fibre to public sectors sites across the region, the funding of private 5G networks to benefit industry, and investment of improved ducting within Aberdeen City. Within this workstream, the Digital Engagement Team was created with a remit to directly support residents, businesses and communities, in matters relating to digital connectivity, and to work with all necessary stakeholders to find ways to improve digital connectivity for the Region, with a key focus on the more rural areas of the Aberdeen City Region.

Since the Digital Engagement Team launched their work at the very start of 2022, the team has handled 630 public enquiries, and has directly engaged with and supported residents of over 2,600 premises. 65% of all residents supported, have been supported to obtain improved broadband connectivity, providing not only a faster internet connection, but the additional resilience, stability and opportunity that better access to the digital world provides.

The digital divide is still a huge challenge for the North East of Scotland, and so much work still needs to be done to deliver improvements in digital connectivity for residents. Ofcom, as the industry regulator, tells us that over 19,000 premises in our region still cannot obtain superfast broadband speeds, defined as 30Mbps, with over 2,000 premises unable to even obtain 2Mbps download speeds. On the other side of digital access, 4G (and indeed 5G) connectivity although improving, still needs improvement in the most rural areas of our region, where 1,900 premises have no access to any 4G network.

The positive news is that big improvements are coming! Scottish Government, through their Reaching 100% programme, are continuing to deliver work to ensure every premise in Scotland can access superfast broadband as a minimum. Project Gigabit from UK Government is continuing to explore the best way to use public monies in Scotland, to get more and more premises connected to full-fibre broadband and gigabit capable solutions. The Shared Rural Network is a joint programme between all the Mobile Networks Operators of the UK and the UK Government to vastly improve 4G coverage across the Country. The Scottish 5G Centre, with their transformational 5G Hub in Aberdeen, are working with industry to promote the benefits of 5G expansion in our region. The Aberdeen City Region Deal continues to see the Digital Workstream as an essential focus for improving the region.

Therefore, the Digital Engagement Team are the local linchpin for residents, businesses and communities, to provide specific and tailored advice on all these matters. The Team is here to lobby Governments, to work with stakeholders, to engage with industry, and to be the loud voice to bring change and improvements.

The Digital Engagement Team is ready and eager to support anyone in matters relating to digital connectivity, and welcome any enquiry to digitalengagement@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or by phone at 01467 469322.

REACHING 100% & SCOTTISH BROADBAND VOUCHER SCHEME

Scottish Government's Reaching 100% programme, often referred to as the R100, is continuing to bring connectivity improvements bit-by-bit to our region. 150 more properties were connected to full-fibre FTTP broadband in the month of August, with residents around Arbuthnott, Oldmledrum, Kintore and Cluny being those who can now access significantly faster broadband of up to 1000Mbps. At the time of reporting, 3,382 premises have now been connected to gigabit capable broadband infrastructure, delivered by Openreach as the contract partner of the R100. The programme will continue to see the building of new infrastructure through to 2028, with just over 13,000 premises still in scope to get a new fibre broadband connection across Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City.

In addition to the contracted infrastructure build plans being delivered by Openreach, the R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme 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).These premises are not included in any known commercial, or publicly subsidised, improvement plans, and therefore should be seizing the opportunity to use available subsidy to install a new, faster broadband solution, that can guarantee at least 30Mbps, but may be able to offer up to 1000Mbps. Nearly 800 vouchers have been used in the Aberdeen City region – meaning 800 premises have been able to secure a better broadband solution. Solutions could utilise enhanced 4G broadband solutions, satellite broadband, fixed wireless broadband solutions, and could even potentially be used to fund a full-fibre project to a community. With only 10% of the available vouchers used, there is an extraordinary amount of public subsidy still available for residents, right across Aberdeenshire, and in some pockets of Aberdeen City.

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 the R100 build plans, and the R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme.

We work closely with telecoms operators of all sizes, and have strong relationships with numerous key stakeholders. Armed with a huge amount of data and information, the Digital Engagement Team will work with you and your community, to conduct localised mapping and research, to provide tailored support, advice and guidance. 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 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.

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 later in the year. The Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS) has now been paused in Scotland, following the same process as other parts of the UK, now that Project Gigabit is moving to a procurement phase in Scotland. To date, we know that nearly 500 GBVS have been used by residents across Aberdeen City & Aberdeenshire, which is believed to be some of the highest uptake in Scotland.

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

LOCAL VIEW

Scottish Government's R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) has enabled people in Aberdeenshire to access superfast broadband speeds.

Duncan, from Aberdeenshire was struggling with poor connectivity before receiving an R100 SBVS voucher, which has been life changing.

Poor connectivity

Duncan said: "I was originally connected on a copper wire but this had several issues. Most significantly, I experienced no connection for two months. We cancelled this and used a sim Wi-Fi unit – 4G coverage at the house was not great, it was okay for basic use but would buffer during Skype calls or streaming."

Value for money and excellent speeds

"When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, I started working from home and communication was difficult. Video calls, file transfers and syncs were chewing through my data allowance at significant cost. This was problematic as it prevented my wife completing her work, requiring her to undertake her internet related work in the evenings.

"The Caleycom installation was quick and was completed in a morning. The dish is unobtrusive and located on a worst weather prevailing wall. Speeds are excellent, the cost and value for money is also very good. Both my wife and I can now work on the internet at the same time. We don't have any buffering issues while streaming and making video calls."

More information on this case study can be found on www.scotlandsuperfast.com, with a link to Duncan's case study found here.

Eligible homes and businesses can check their address on the R100 postcode checker at www.scotlandsuperfast.com, and can find out what suppliers provide broadband services in their local area.

ABERDEEN CITY REGION DEAL:
Powering Tomorrow's World

Aberdeenshire COUNCIL | The Scottish Government Riaghaltas na h-Alba | UK Government | ONE OPPORTUNITY NORTH EAST

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MOVE TO DIGITAL VOICE – PSTN RETIREMENT

The retirement of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) is a significant transition that residents need to be aware of. Here's what you need to know:

- **Transition to VoIP:** The PSTN is being phased out in favour of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology. This means your landline phone service will soon rely on the internet. Once implemented, landline phones will be plugged in to your router instead of the wall phone socket, and calls will be made over the internet connection, instead of the old analogue connection.

- **Backup Power:** Unlike traditional landlines that work during power outages, VoIP relies on electricity and internet connectivity. Service providers can, and will, provide resilience solutions that allow residents to make calls in the event of a power cut. Ofcom also provides guidance that states it is the responsibility of the telecoms providers to ensure that solutions to allow residents to make calls in the event of a power cut, are provided free-of-charge to residents likely to experience such events.

- **Service Provision:** Research different VoIP service providers and plans available in your area. Compare prices, features, and customer reviews to find the best fit for your needs. Consider factors like call quality, customer support, and international calling options. You can keep your existing phone number when transitioning to VoIP. Discuss this with your chosen provider to avoid any disruptions.

- **Data & Speed Requirements:** VoIP consumes a very small amount of internet data, so be mindful of your data plan if you have limited bandwidth. Most Service Providers can provide VoIP only services for residents who do not wish to have an internet package. VoIP services also require a minimal amount of bandwidth or broadband speed, and so even premises with older copper broadband connections, will still be able to easily utilise VoIP services.

- **Timeline:** Stay informed about the timeline for the PSTN retirement. This process is happening across the UK, and will reach all areas of the UK at different times. For more information and support, the Digital Engagement Team is eager to answer questions and provide impartial advice to residents, businesses and communities – contact them at digitalengagement@aberdeenshire.gov.uk. Speak to your current provider of phone/broadband services, to ask for their timelines on making the switch to VoIP. More information on the retirement of the PSTN can be found at Future of Voice at www.futureofvoice.co.uk.

In conclusion, the retirement of the PSTN in the UK is a technological advancement that will bring numerous benefits, but it requires some preparation and awareness. By taking these steps and staying informed, you can ensure uninterrupted communication in the digital age.

OPERATOR SPOTLIGHT

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

GoFibre is a Scottish independent broadband builder and provider founded in Duns in the Scottish Borders in 2017. With rural areas, like Duns, being largely underserved when it comes to digital connectivity, GoFibre was born out of the need to solve this issue. They are on a mission to ensure that rural and harder to reach communities are not left behind across Scotland and the north of England.

And the good news is, that includes Aberdeenshire.

Currently, more than 4,500 premises across Portlethen, Newtonhill and Stonehaven are already able to sign up to GoFibre's full fibre broadband packages, instantly benefitting from better connectivity speeds and overall reliability.

GoFibre's footprint in Aberdeenshire is only set to increase as they move into Laurencekirk. Construction is underway, which, when complete, will connect approximately 1,600 additional residents and businesses to the best connectivity available for now and the future.

Neil Conaghan, Chief Executive Officer, GoFibre said: "We are excited to add Laurencekirk to our full fibre broadband network, following remarkable progress and uptake across Portlethen, Newtonhill and Stonehaven.

"If you are a local resident or business owner interested in learning more about the advantages our network can offer, please get in touch to register your interest.

"We would like to thank everyone for their ongoing patience and support as we work to connect them to the benefits of full fibre technology."

Residents and businesses in areas that are ready for service can buy now or register for updates in the area by visiting gofibre.co.uk/check.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TEAM JOURNAL

Through the month of August, 43 premises received support from the Digital Engagement Team, with a mixture of individual residents looking for support in getting better digital connectivity, with some community clusters coming together to seek a bespoke solution for their community. 64% of these enquiries were resolved with a positive outcome, providing answers and solutions for residents, businesses and communities.

Additionally, some of the highlights from the last month include:

·A well-attended, and well received, presentation to the Fyvie, Rothienorman and Monquhitter Community Council, providing answers and insight into the opportunities to improve connectivity for these rural communities. The Digital Engagement Team also welcomed attendance and support from David Duguid MP.

·The Digital Engagement Team has been working with Aberdeen City Region partners to explore application for the 5G Innovation Region Fund from Building Digital UK (BDUK), which can provide up to £3.8m of grant funding to explore innovation, and foster the ecosystem, for 5G technology and connectivity.

·Through productive and welcomed conversations with Openreach, the Digital Engagement Team is playing a part in the development of Fibre Community Partnerships, which can bring full-fibre connections to residents excluded from other plans.

·Scottish Government held their Quarterly Digital Connectivity event for Local Authorities, at which a lot of valuable information and updates were provided, giving scope and perspective on the different ways we can work to improve digital connectivity in our Region.

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:

·**5th – 8th September** – Offshore Europe (OE) is back at P&J Live, bringing huge networking opportunities for the energy industry and supporting industries

·**8th September** – Aberdeen City Region Deal Joint Committee meets to discuss progress with the Aberdeen City Region Deal, including the Digital Workstream within which the Digital Engagement Team operates.

·**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.

·**26th September** – The Digital Engagement Team is attending the Meldrum, Bourtie & Daviot Community Council to provide information and support in matters relating to digital connectivity.

·**2nd October** – Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils are hosting a joint Community Resilience Conference at Aberdeen Beach Ballroom, where the Digital Engagement Team will be present to provide advice and support in the area of telecoms resilience.

·**10th October** – The Digital Engagement Team is presenting at the Donside Community Council, to provide insight into digital connectivity opportunities in the Strathdon area.

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

·Working with a local telecoms operator and rural communities to explore a digital connectivity solution in the North of Aberdeenshire, which could be the first of its kind in Scotland

·Collaborating with partners in the Aberdeen City Region Deal to explore new ways to foster the 5G ecosystem in North East Scotland

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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