DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT NEWSLETTER

July 2023
Edition #1

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TEAM CONTINUES TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNITIES TO GET BETTER BROADBAND

Communities across Aberdeenshire are being urged to investigate the opportunities for better broadband this year. That's the message from Aberdeenshire Council's Digital Engagement Team which supports north-east residents, businesses and communities to obtain better digital services.

Funded by the Aberdeen City Region Deal, the team is available to provide advice, guidance and support to utilise various programmes to obtain superfast broadband (30Mbps). For the past year, the team has been engaging closely with local and national telecoms operators to develop the best solutions for every area of Aberdeenshire – helped by Scottish Government vouchers to help obtain a temporary, superfast broadband solution while they wait for their full-fibre installation.

Scottish Government's Reaching 100% (R100) programme will ensure that all premises in Scotland have access to Superfast Broadband through significant improvement in full-fibre broadband infrastructure, as well as provision of the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme, allowing many residents to receive subsidy support to install a faster broadband solution.

While there has been an encouraging 10% take-up of the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme in Aberdeenshire, another 6,000 premises still remain eligible for up to £5,000 of subsidy support . While there is no deadline for the vouchers, the Digital Engagement Team is keen to get the 6,000 households which haven't claimed it, to start investigating the possibilities of an improved service, with a range of solutions available.

Digital Stakeholder Lead Officer Jack Rigby explained: "The Digital Engagement Team can ensure all options are explored for every location in the region which could mean full-fibre broadband, fixed wireless broadband, satellite broadband or mobile broadband. With access to a huge amount of data and information, the Digital Engagement Team is well placed to support any residents in securing better broadband solutions, able to advise in a number of areas.

"Aberdeenshire has one of the best percentage take-ups in Scotland which is tremendous, but we still have several thousand properties which could benefit from the available voucher scheme. Better digital connectivity across Aberdeenshire is embedded at the heart of our Council Plan and is vital for both regional economic development and for our residents and communities. It is particularly important that we really start driving forward for better broadband services this year as telecoms operators will be retiring their analogue Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) networks at the end of 2025."

Paul Macari, Head of the council's Planning and Economy Service, said: "Since our Digital Engagement Team was formed last year, they have supported over 1,400 households to investigate better broadband services and they will continue to do their utmost to support communities identify the solutions which are best for them. We know there are still around 13,500 properties awaiting full-fibre broadband installation by 2028, which simply highlights the scale of the job ahead.

"I would encourage residents and businesses to contact the team as a matter of urgency to see how they could benefit from the Government Voucher schemes and work with our officers to identify bespoke broadband services which will suit their needs and requirements."

REACHING 100% & SCOTTISH BROADBAND VOUCHER SCHEME

The Reaching 100% Programme, also known as the R100, continues to deliver significant infrastructure upgrades to the broadband connections for many residents across the Aberdeen City Region. Despite some initial delays and reforecasting in 2022, the programme continues at pace, and has now connected 2,934 premises to full-fibre broadband, meaning residents now have access to gigabit capable broadband packages, bringing better and faster connectivity to the digital space. The programme is due to connect another 1,436 premises by the end of the year, and a further 11,955 beyond that before its completion in 2028.

Good dialogue and work between infrastructure provider Openreach and the Digital Engagement Team, is driving further positive results. Helping Openreach to go further, and benefit additional properties, has resulted in an Overspill rate of 16% to date, meaning an additional 470 properties in the Region have been connected to full-fibre, in addition to the properties included in the R100 contract build plans.

The Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) remains in place, as a voucher subsidy of up to £5,000 for premises that cannot obtain superfast broadband 30Mbps, and are not included in any publicly funded or commercial improvement programme. 9,380nvouchers are still available to be used across Aberdeenshire & Aberdeen City, with 743 used to date, giving us a 7% uptake rate. Aberdeenshire continues to deliver the highest uptake in vouchers in Scotland, in both percentage (11%) and volume (719), however with so many vouchers still left to utilise, there is much work still do, and many residents still to support. The Digital Engagement Team is keen and eager to support any resident who is, or may be, eligible to utilise a voucher.

You can check your property's status for programme support at www.scotlandsuperfast.com. Or for more tailored support for your premise contact the Digital Engagement Team at digitalengagement@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

OFCOM - CONNECTED NATIONS UPDATE

In May, Ofcom published the Spring 2023 Connected Nations Update, an industry report focusing on coverage and performance of fixed broadband and mobile networks across the UK. This report shed light on the remarkable progress made in improving digital connectivity in our region. Lets dive into the key findings and explore how this development positively impacts the Aberdeen City Region.

According to the report, Aberdeenshire has experienced further growth in both fixed and mobile broadband coverage. This is fantastic news for businesses, residents and communities across the Region. Improved broadband access opens up a world of opportunities, enabling seamless communication, enhancing productivity, and fostering innovation. Moreover, improved digital connectivity has a direct impact on the lives of residents. It enables access to online education, telehealth services, and other essential digital resources. It bridges the digital divide, ensuring that every individual has equal opportunities to thrive in a digital age.

Availability of Superfast Broadband for premises has increased, but additionally full-fibre availability has jumped up by over 8% in the last 12 months, meaning over 10,000 premises have seen network upgrades in the last year, and can now access gigabit capable broadband connections. There is no doubt that the Reaching 100% programme is driving this huge shift in connectivity for our region.

In terms of mobile coverage, the report highlights a small expansion of 4G networks in the Region, but is now able to show the increased coverage of 5G networks, with 25% of Aberdeenshire residents now able to benefit from 5G connectivity. This advancement paves the way for enhanced mobile experiences, from faster download speeds to more reliable connections.

As we celebrate this news, it is essential to acknowledge the collaborative efforts of Telecoms Operators, colleagues across all levels of Government, Service Providers, and other stakeholders involved in this digital transformation journey. And whilst this positive news showcases some of the progress we in the Digital Engagement Team are making, it also serves as a call to action. We must continue striving for even greater digital connectivity, exploring innovative technologies and solutions, and ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital revolution.

The full Connection Nations Update: Spring 2023 report can be found here:

www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/infrastructure-research/spring-2023

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MOBILE CONNECTIVITY UPDATES

In the modern digital era, access to reliable mobile connectivity has become increasingly vital for communities to thrive, both socially and economically. For rural areas like North East Scotland, ensuring equitable access to high-quality mobile services has often presented significant challenges. However, improvements are coming with the implementation of the Shared Rural Network (SRN), a transformative initiative with tremendous benefits for our region.

The SRN is a collaborative project between the UK government and the four major mobile network operators (MNOs): EE, O2, Three, and Vodafone. Its primary aim is to improve mobile coverage in rural areas across the UK, bringing enhanced connectivity to communities that have historically suffered from limited or no network access.

Here in North East Scotland, the SRN is set to revolutionize the way we connect, bringing forth several significant benefits, namely: Enhanced connectivity; Economic empowerment; Educational advancements; Community cohesion; Emergency services response.

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 will 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

Rural communities now have the opportunity to improve their broadband speeds, with local engagement, and support from the Digital Engagement Team. With the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme, as part of Scottish Government's R100 programme, and the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, as part of UK Government's Project Gigabit, there is now more support than ever before, for rural residents to ditch the slow broadband that has dogged some communities.

Keith Roberts, a spokesperson for the Bridge of Canny area on Deeside, reached out to the Digital Engagement Team, looking for support in navigating the information and processes open to residents. Using property-level data, and being able to liaise directly with Government representatives, it was established that there was a potential £129,000 worth of subsidy support available to the cluster of residents in Bridge of Canny.

Keith said "There was considerable frustration amongst the Bridge of Canny residents with the broadband speeds currently available, and further frustration that the area was largely excluded from the R100's planned future upgrades. The Digital Engagement Team have helped immensely in not only clarifying the support available from the Scottish and UK governments, but in articulating the different upgrades options available and the likely costs involved. We now have a funding target and a clear understanding in the community of what needs to be done by individual residents to apply for available funding."

The Bridge of Canny residents, and the Digital Engagement Team, are still working towards some final resolutions for the community, working closely together with telecoms operators, with an optimistic view of improved broadband for a rural Aberdeenshire community.

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MOVE TO DIGITAL VOICE - PSTN RETIREMENT

Change is an inevitable part of progress, and the world of technology constantly evolves to bring us newer, faster, and more efficient means of communication. Today, we are getting ready to bid farewell to an old stalwart that has faithfully served the UK for decades—the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN)

The PSTN, a fundamental component of our telecommunication infrastructure, has played a vital role in connecting us for over a century. However, as we embrace the digital age and witness the rise of internet-based communication technologies, it is time to retire the PSTN and welcome a new era of connectivity.

So, what exactly is the PSTN? It is the traditional circuit-switched network that handles analogue voice data, allowing us to make phone calls using landline telephones. It has served as the backbone of telephony, enabling countless conversations and linking homes and businesses across the country. However, with the advent of digital communication systems, such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), the PSTN has gradually become outdated and less cost-effective.

As of December 2025, BT plans to shut down the PSTN network in the UK. This means that traditional landline phones, which rely on the PSTN, will no longer function in the same way. Instead, we will transition towards fully digital and internet-based solutions, offering a myriad of advantages, including enhanced call quality, improved reliability, and the integration of various multimedia services. This retirement also paves the way for new technologies that can leverage the power of the internet to revolutionize communication. Voice and video calls conducted through the internet will become the norm, enabling seamless connectivity on smartphones, computers, and other internet-connected devices. The move to internet-based telephony brings about greater flexibility, affordability, and a host of innovative features that were previously unimaginable.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this transition may present challenges for some individuals, particularly those who have relied on the traditional landline system for years. To ensure a smooth transition, Ofcom, Government and telecommunications providers are actively working together to assist those who may require support during the switch. Information campaigns, training programs, and helplines have been established to guide individuals and organisations through the migration process, ensuring that no one is left behind. Additionally, the Digital Engagement Team is ready and able to advise and support any resident, business or community, in their questions or concerns around moving to Digital Voice services.

Change can be both exciting and daunting, but it is through embracing these transformations that we progress as a society. So, let us bid farewell to the PSTN network with gratitude for its years of service, and with hope and anticipation for the innovations that lie ahead.

More information on the retirement of the PSTN can be found at Future of Voice, here:

www.futureofvoice.co.uk

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TEAM JOURNAL

June was a productive month for the Digital Engagement Team. 31 premises have been directly supported by the Team in matters relating to digital connectivity, which is a drop in the number of enquiries compared to previous months. However, the Team have been focusing on larger projects to benefit wider communities, as well as developing new avenues of work. Some of the highlights of the past month include:

- The Digital Engagement Team has been working with Openreach to develop a Fibre Community Partnership approach to deliver full-fibre improvements to a large number of premises in Aberdeen City. Exploring the need to upgrade the Denburn Telephone Exchange, Openreach has sought support from the Team to engage with over 350 residents and tenants, to leverage Scottish Government subsidy through the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme. This project continues at pace, with positive results so far.

- Working across various Council services, the Digital Engagement Team is exploring ways to support open up new avenues of approach, to identify Council tenants with poor connectivity, and offer various aspects of support to seek improved situations.

- As part of the Single-Point-of-Contact (SPoC) network, the Digital Engagement Team has been working with all 32 Local Authorities, and Scottish Government colleagues, to develop new approaches in promoting the various Government programmes, and creating best practices in community engagement and support.

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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 July 2023** - The Digital Engagement Team is hosting a first drop-in Q&A session for Aberdeen City Centre residents connected to the Denburn Exchange, to hear more about Openreach's Fibre Community Partnership project in this part of the City.

- **13th July 2023** - The Digital Engagement Team is hosting a second drop-in Q&A session for Aberdeen City Centre residents connected to the Denburn Exchange, to hear more about Openreach's Fibre Community Partnership project in this part of the City.

- **18th July 2023** - The Digital Engagement Team is holding a briefing for Elected Members and Community Council representatives for Aberdeen City, to explain the work of the team, and promote the various workstreams relating to digital connectivity.

- **20th July 2023** - The Digital Engagement Team will be attending a meeting with the Strathdon Community Development Trust Board, to explore the challenges and opportunities in digital connectivity, for the Strathdon area of Aberdeenshire.

- **TBC** - The Digital Engagement Team has been invited to address representatives of rural Estates in Mid Deeside, through Scottish Land & Estates. Date and venue of meeting to be confirmed.

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

- Ongoing work with Bennachie Community Council, identifying opportunities for SBVS usage across the settlements within the CC area.

- Local research and engagement with community venues across the Garioch area of Aberdeenshire, exploring where connectivity and equipment support is required, to support community venues to become hybrid enabled.

- Developing a project with a Telecoms Operator utilising Aberdeenshire Council assets, to expand and install new connectivity infrastructure.

- Working with BT to create a community engagement strategy for North East Scotland relating to the retirement of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN).

DIRECTORY

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

Supplier Name	Website	Full Fibre	Fixed Wireless	Fixed Mobile	Satellite
Assured Telecoms	https://www.assuredtelecoms.co.uk/	Yes			
Bentley Walker	https://bentley-walker.com/			Yes	Yes
Converged Rural Broadband	http://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	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	
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/

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