

Questions and Answers

Cherwell Digital: mobile & broadband

The following questions have been posed by members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee ahead of the postponed meeting on 17 March 2020, for further discussion. The answers are provided by officers involved in the development of the broad strategy, with the technical detail provided by the OCC Digital Director (Craig Bower).

1. What is **CDC's Industrial Strategy** for the future in terms of attracting new business, maintaining businesses already based in Cherwell, improving/enhancing what we already have in Cherwell and ensuring Cherwell is more attractive than other competing districts?

The Cherwell Industrial Strategy (2020-30) is under development and emerging themes include the retention and support of existing businesses and the attraction of inward investment. Meanwhile, services are being provided - directly and in partnership – to support residents, businesses, visitors and investors.

2. How do we ensure that our Cherwell Digital Strategy **integrates** across:

- a. Industrial Strategy? The Digital infrastructure team worked closely with OxLEP in ensuring the content pertaining to digital infrastructure within the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy (LIS), is consistent with the programme strategy, the Joint Strategic Spatial Plan (JSSP), and the Transport & Connectivity Plan. The Cherwell Industrial Strategy will reflect further detail locally.
- b. Growth Board? The Growth Board has formally 'welcomed' the Digital Infrastructure Strategy, offering its full support to the programme.
- c. ARC? There is a Digital Infrastructure Working Group in place with members of the ARC chaired by the Director of England's Economic Heartland (Martin Tugwell). This includes Oxfordshire, Bucks, Cambridgeshire, Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire and others. The Oxfordshire Director of Digital (Craig Bower) has advocated to this Group that the concept of the Oxfordshire Digital Infrastructure Partnership (with districts, city, LEP) is stretched to cover all local authorities of the ARC, presenting one clear voice to Government.

3. Are there **neighbouring districts/counties** that can be partnered with to speed up and improve our chances of digital/5G coverage?

The point of the Oxfordshire Digital Infrastructure partnership is to have one voice to speak to fixed and mobile operators, and indeed for them to speak to us. We are exploring the opportunity to extend this partnership approach across all local authority members of the ARC.

4. How do we ensure that we are up to date with the **fast-changing requirements of Industry**, so that as a Council we can make the best informed decisions?

The proposed Digital Infrastructure Partnership programme is set up to specifically advise and manage this. We are initiating a new quarterly Digital Infrastructure Strategic Board to update members on specific programme updates, and also to discuss applications of emerging technologies such as 5G, Artificial Intelligence, and Augmented Reality.

5. How does Cherwell ensure it has the right **Planning Policies** in place to encourage connectivity through fibre and 5G in order to retain and attract Industry to the District, for jobs, personnel development of residents and fair share of income for the District?

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) presented as part of the Oxfordshire Digital Infrastructure Partnership, contemplates a range of policies which will assist in developing supplier investment in Oxfordshire. In specific response to the subject of Planning, it should be noted that the revised Electronic Communications Code (2017) makes permitted development of communications networks and equipment considerably easier and less expensive for the code operators (mobile and fixed network operators). In general, Cherwell District Council as Local Planning Authority is asked to assess planning applications (where required) for improvements to mobile (mast) infrastructure with a view to allowing such improvements. Where the operator's proposed infrastructure is unacceptable, a meeting is requested to assist the development of alternatives (rather than just saying "NO").

6. What does CDC Planning need to do to accommodate 5G? Do **planning regulations** need to be amended/relaxed in order to accommodate 5G transmitters/masts?

So far as 5G is concerned, there are no specific additional planning requirements. In general, the revised Electronic Communications Code (2017) allows greater flexibility for Operators. The proposed MoU which underpins the Oxfordshire Digital Infrastructure Partnership describes that intervention with the Local Planning Authority responsible for such planning permissions which is encouraged to promote the benefits of mobile coverage improvements.

7. Are there **funding avenues** that we should be actively exploring to speed up rollout or raise connectivity quality standards eg government loans linked to Growth Boards or other government connectivity policies?

The Digital Infrastructure programme (led by OCC and partnered with districts) is taking the lead on funding applications of this type. For example, we secured £8m of funding from DCMS for our broadband programme, and more recently we were awarded £6.3m from DEFRA for funding rollout of full-fibre broadband to businesses in rural Oxfordshire. We are as a partnership, considering a proactive proposal to government, under the Growth Board, to have funding drawn down from the anticipated £5bn fund (expected on 11 March 2020) aimed at the DCMS 'Outside-In' full-fibre intervention funding. Help is however always welcome from Cherwell in developing these funding options.

8. What does Cherwell need to do to ensure **common technology standards** are applied by providers to ensure faster roll out speed and easier connectivity?

I'm not sure Cherwell needs to/can do anything about standards. One area to perhaps reinforce (again) is that planning conditions for new housing developments should require the developer to provide open-access full-fibre broadband infrastructure in all cases. This is typically free if the developer requests this from Openreach before initiating build, as explained at: <https://www.openreach.com/fibre-broadband/fibre-for-developers/registering-your-site/>

9. How do we ensure that we **leverage critical mass customers to encourage 5G Providers** to make a start, including leveraging such networks / contracts across Industry and Housing?

We have been lobbying networks such as CTIL, MBNL, MobileUK, and the four Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) to invest in 5G deployment in Oxfordshire. The Digital Infrastructure Strategy, reinforced by the Digital Infrastructure Partnership, sets out a

landscape where we will offer practical support for 5G rollout. This includes offering access to public sector assets (such as street lighting columns) on a neutral host (non-exclusive) basis, a promise to help with planning issues where they occur, each partner having a senior officer or member as champion, utility-friendly highways access, etc. More could be done to develop specific 'vertical sector' applications such as Agriculture, Manufacturing, & Logistics.

10. Are there **lessons to be learned** from any other Councils e.g. West Midlands fast paced start on 5G?

Yes, and the Oxfordshire Digital Infrastructure programme has regular meetings with both the WM5G management team, as well as having a place on the DCMS 5G working group. The challenge for Oxfordshire is the relative commercial attractiveness to operators of a relatively rural setting (in comparison to for e.g. the west midlands)

11. Are there any Councils ahead of us **on fixing mobile blackspots** that we can learn from?

One or two have had direct LEP investment whereby they have funded MNO masts to be built. Not cheap, and fraught with state aid issues.

12. Can the fibre network that has been put in place for better broadband be used to **fix the blackspots**?

Assuming this refers to mobile blackspots, the answer is frustratingly, no not really. Why? The four MNO's (Vodafone, Three, O2, EE) are increasingly wanting to build and own their own fibre backhaul rather than use shared infrastructure.

13. How do we **prioritise blackspots** in liaison with the Providers?

Providers = MNO's? We have very little influence. All we can do is offer to help with securing permissions and wayleaves to reduce deployment costs. The £1bn Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme (expected to be agreed in the next few months) will significantly reduce not just blackspots, but just as annoying *partial* blackspots where there may be coverage by one or two MNO's but not the others.

14. How can the **Shared Rural Network** (SRN) improve/ease the roll out of 5G within the district?

The SRN - if eventually signed - will not necessarily focus on 5G per se. The distinct characteristics/benefits of 5G are not as strong in a rural setting as in urban (densification). However, 4G is still a very good and fast technology for mobile.

15. Do we know how much space/connectivity 5G transmitters require, can they be located in **Church Towers** for example which would be the logical location within rural communities, as churches are already located within rural conurbations?

Church towers are not typically useful for deploying 5G as access across sacred land (burial) is very difficult to provision fibre to. Also, whilst the cost of building and maintaining mast infrastructure is not inconsiderable, it is the cost of connecting rural locations to dedicated high capacity fibre backhaul which harms the business case.

16. Are there any **plans to swap out areas that are served with aluminium cabling** and change this to either fibre or copper?

The reality is that Openreach are planning to switch off (fully decommission) the copper/aluminium network at some point this decade. This switch-over can only happen

once there is a near full-fibre deployment which is the stated objective of the government (reflecting the Future Telecoms Infrastructure Review). Note, we will have to see what Openreach does when there is an alternative full-fibre connection in place from the growing so called 'Altnet Operators'. There is no chance Openreach will swap out aluminium for copper.

17. If not, are there any other **plans to mitigate these problems in more isolated rural areas**, microwave services perhaps?

Microwave or satellite will remain an option for the very rural – say the last 0.5% of UK premises. The current stated HMG objective (and that of our programme) is that full-fibre broadband will be deployed nearly everywhere by 2025. Our programme is driving this objective, delivering full-fibre connectivity every day, as well as lobbying the main operators to invest in Oxfordshire as described in the Oxfordshire Digital Infrastructure Strategy.