

Herefordshire Food and Tourism Partnership, 26th August 2014

Present: David Curtis (Chair), Jenny Beard, Clare Greener, Cathy Meredith, Rachel Jones, Clare Price, Nick Read

In Attendance: Molly (on work experience), David Bland

Apologies: Christine Hope, Bobbie Heavens, Clare O-Reilly, David Turner

The meeting was specifically to discuss the provision of Broadband within Herefordshire and the impact that poor communications were having on businesses. This was an issue that had been flagged up by businesses during consultations. Unfortunately a representative from “Fastershire”, the Herefordshire broadband initiative, was unable to attend. Fastershire was being piloted in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire and had started rolling out in 2013. However, of the 30 exchanges on line only 4 were within Herefordshire. It was felt that mobile coverage within the county was also getting worse.

On 1st January 2015 Digital by Design would also take effect, whereby farming businesses would be required to submit forms online. Recently, however, there had been legal challenges to this under human rights legislation. Nevertheless, it was felt that this would have an adverse impact on a significant number of Herefordshire farmers.

David Bland outlined his background in IT and telecommunications and indicated that Herefordshire was not unique in the provision of poor rural broadband. In his presentation he indicated:

- Rural broadband was essentially an extension of urban broadband projects and the link to urban was important.
- Commercial coverage nationally accounts for <20% of the total land area.
- Attaining 95% population coverage will still account for <50% of the total land area.
- Digital IQ peaks with teenagers, declines in the >50s and yet decision-making tends to be made by the latter
- However, smartphones and tablets are improving digital IQs amongst the elderly
- There is considerable evidence to show that the values of houses are improved if there is good broadband connection and that educational grades of children are also enhanced.
- Links to exchanges are not really relevant except that this is where OfCom forces BT to hand over data to other suppliers. There are only two internet exchanges in the UK, in London and Manchester.
- It is possible to have wireless connections as well as fibre and new technology allows for line of sight communications to be established between buildings.
- The alternatives to BT include Alternative Network Operators (AltNets). Examples of these include:
 - Broadband for the Rural North (the Vale of Bowland)
 - Wansdyke (Somerset)
 - Overbury Estates
 - Cybermoor in Cumbria
 - Gigaclear in Oxfordshire

The ensuing discussion suggested:

- We need to find out the gaps in coverage within Herefordshire that would still be present even after Fastershire had been completed. Although Local Authorities and BT were often

reluctant to release the information it should be publicly available. It was proposed to draft a letter on behalf of rural stakeholders (Duchy, NFU, Church, Business Board etc) to solicit the information.

- Once identified we needed to encourage community action to look at alternatives.
- David Curtis offered to fund two days of David Bland's time to act as a consultant to the group to forward this issue.

Other issues

- Jenny proposed inviting Bright Stripe to sit on the partnership, which was approved.
- Jenny had spoken to Richard Tyler on cross-border issues. Richard had enquired whether we were being funded as a Destination Management Partnership. This offered a potential source of resources.
- The Federation of Small Businesses would like to support a Forum and it was suggested that rural broadband would be a suitable subject.
- The Chief Executive of Herefordshire Council was proposing an economic strategy for the county and sector leads were being identified. Clare and Cathy were in the food and drink category and Nick for the environment.

Date of Next Meeting

8th October at 2pm at Plough Lane.