Broadband Development

This paper provides an overview of central government activity to develop a strategy for the delivery of improved Broadband infrastructure in the UK. It provides an overview of the government’s broadband delivery programme (BDUK), information on national funding for broadband development and opportunities for partners within Braintree to improve broadband infrastructure available for businesses and residents.

Background

Stimulating investment in the UK’s broadband infrastructure is one of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s (DCMS) top priorities. Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) has been created as a delivery vehicle to advance the government’s work to stimulate private investment using the limited public funding that is available.

BDUK’s primary goals include:

i) ensuring the UK has the best Superfast Broadband in Europe by the end of this parliament (2015);

ii) ensuring delivery of Standard Broadband to virtually all communities in the UK within the lifetime of this parliament (2015);

iii) ensuring the efficient use of funding to deliver Superfast Broadband and Standard Broadband; and

iv) assisting other Government initiatives which are dependent upon customers’ ability to access Broadband based services.

BDUK hope to use public funds to stimulate investment in broadband infrastructure. Their primary focus will be on stimulating private investment in areas of the country that the private sector, by itself, will not deliver. The market will be able to use this infrastructure to deliver the services demanded by businesses and residents.

To achieve these goals, BDUK is engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, including the communications industry, public sector bodies, OFCOM, regional bodies and community groups, to:

- Develop the commercial and delivery models that will be used for investing public money in broadband;
- Plan and execute four superfast broadband pilots to ensure that the maximum information is gained for targeting potential future government intervention;
- Investigate the detail of reuse of public sector networks and assets, identify the challenges and develop solutions;
- Develop tools and guidance for communities to come together to help solve their broadband issues; and
- Develop tools and guidance for local authorities wishing to help solve broadband issues in their areas.

Point five is particularly important. While BDUK is responsible for the national approach to the delivery of broadband, it will be for local bodies to develop
Broadband Plans, involve local communities, source EU and local funding and to define and deliver local projects.

The availability of funding

The Comprehensive Spending Review 2010, made £530 million available to support the objectives of BDUK.

Tier one local authorities (e.g. Essex County Council) and Local Enterprise Partnerships can access this funding through a bidding process managed by BDUK. It is LEPs and tier one authorities that will have primary responsibility for ensuring the appropriate delivery of broadband in their areas. Broadband development work in the Braintree area therefore needs to link with activity being undertaken by Essex County Council as the lead authority.

Access to funding (£50 million of which will be made available in the next tranche of awards) is dependent on the development of a Local Broadband Plan (LBP). The LBP will need to document the approach the local broadband outcomes to be delivered and the approach to be taken. In addition to developing the plan, Essex County Council will be responsible for:

- securing investment – from BDUK, as well as from additional public, private and European sources;
- designing, procuring and implementing solutions;
- ensuring any state aid approvals and clearances;
- demand registration and stimulation; and
- monitoring outcomes and benefits realisation activities.

BDUK wish to see local commitment to any proposed projects. Any funding bids and local broadband plans must include a local financial contribution. Bids must identify whether the local contribution will come from local authority sources or external partners such as health authorities as well as the private sector. Contributions can be made either as capital investment (ideally in the form of invest to save contributions) or in the form of guaranteed public sector demand for broadband (providing an ‘anchor customer’ for any new development).

The greater the overall contribution towards the costs from local authorities and other organisations, the more positively the bid will be considered by government.

The requirement for additional locally sourced funding highlights the fact that BDUK funding will not of itself be sufficient to provision superfast broadband. Rather it is the intention that the funding should provide a stimulus to support additional public and private investment.

Crucially, there is also an expectation that bidders will be ready to make immediate use of any BDUK funding they secure the funding. Local authorities who are considering submitting a bid should have already undertaken preparatory work to develop a Local Broadband Plan.
The Essex approach

Essex County Council have expressed an interest to BDUK for a future bid to be made. They have started to prepare a LBP and requested that District and Borough authorities work with them to on this. Essex County Council wish to see a market led approach to delivering Broadband access in the County wherever possible. A successful pilot has been supported in the Maldon District for the development of a wireless internet solution using radio waves, this is being extended across Uttlesford and will reach some rural areas of the Braintree District due to the coverage offered from the transmission points.

A mix of technologies – fixed, wireless and satellite – will be needed to deliver superfast broadband in the County. One technology choice will not be suitable for all circumstances. Essex County Council remains technology-neutral as to how Broadband will be delivered locally.

Essex County Council has also worked with consultants to prepare a review of the current Broadband landscape in the County. This has compiled evidence on general availability, choice and predicted performance. The report contains an analysis of Broadband speeds, types, coverage and of the areas which are expected to be the most challenging to provide service.

Braintree

Within ECC’s review of local broadband evidence, ten parishes in Braintree have been identified as being significantly challenging for the deployment of NextGeneration Broadband. These are:

Coggeshall; Silver End; Steeple Bumpstead;
Great Bardfield; Hedingham; Kelvedon;
Great Yeldham; Hatfield Peveril; Terling; and
Ridgewell.

In working with Essex County Council to develop a LBP it be will important to identify in more detail the Broadband provision that exists within the District and where investment is required. This local evidence will feed into the LBP but, more importantly, will provide information to the commercial market, stimulating interest in investment opportunities.

BT have already upgraded the Braintree telephone exchange and have committed to upgrade Witham and Halstead exchanges. These upgrades will allow up to 40mbps high speed Broadband. This does not, however, mean that all business and residents covered by these exchanges will be able to access this quality of Broadband. This will depend on how far they are located from the green cabinets which carry the fibre network. It will therefore be important to engage directly with businesses and Parish Councils to understand current coverage and where to resources will need to be directed.

BDUK recognise that communities and local authorities should have a say in how these new Broadband networks will be developed. By putting the people who will eventually use the infrastructure in a position to shape it, it is hoped this will bridge the gap between competition and investment. In principal, by increasing the number of customers in an area that take up broadband services this can significantly change whether an investment in an area is economically viable for the private sector.
Demand is therefore important for BDUK – the more people likely to take up broadband, the smaller the investment BDUK has to make. It is within the control of local communities to drive forward their demand and ensure there is enough take up for any solution they seek for their area.

As part of the work on the pilot projects, BDUK will be use a number of tools to assist consumers register the fact that they can’t get broadband, help communities organise to help solve the broadband issues in their community and to help community groups share their experiences and provide advice to each other. These tools will be shared as they become available.

The market in some areas in the UK is making great strides in delivering superfast broadband services, with Virgin Media and BT rapidly deploying networks. Smaller communications providers such as Rutland Telecom, Buzcom, County broadband and Vtesse and Geo are finding innovative ways of delivering superfast broadband in areas where it is economically challenging to do so. Community broadband schemes are also playing a vital role in the deployment of superfast broadband.

County Broadband, a Braintree based internet provider has recently commissioned a study from the Rural Broadband Partnership to ask each Parish Council in Essex to comment on the quality of the broadband infrastructure in their area, the results of this will be available shortly and will feed into the Essex Broadband Plan.

A ‘County Broadband’ event is to be held on 18th July in Coggeshall. This will provide additional information on the rural broadband partnership report. Further update on local activity and development on the LBP will be provided at subsequent meetings.