

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM 7

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

9 DECEMBER 2014

<p>FINAL REPORT - MIDDLESBROUGH: WI-FI TOWN</p>
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PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the Economic Regeneration and Transport Scrutiny Panel's findings, conclusions and recommendations following its investigation of Middlesbrough: Wi-fi Town.

BACKGROUND

2. 2014 marks the 25th anniversary of the World Wide Web, or internet. Today, the internet has 2.4 billion users worldwide. To put this speed of adoption in context, radio took 38 years to reach 50 million users; television took 13 years; the internet took four years; and Facebook 10 months.
3. The internet has transformed almost every aspect of public, private and work life. It has underpinned a new economy - from changing the way every workplace and employee communicates to creating entire new industries. It is also reshaping national and local government, through improved public services and improving transparency through open data and access to information.
4. The internet has also improved people's lives - whether through finding a job, cutting household bills, or maintaining contact with friends and relatives. For business and voluntary organisations, going online can provide ways to reach more customers and reduce operating costs. The internet also provides broader benefits, by helping to address wider social and economic issues like reducing isolation and improving health.
5. However, recent research published by the BBC found that 21% of Britain's population lack the basic digital skills and capabilities required to realise the benefits of the internet. A further illustration of the value of the internet is that independent analysis has estimated that full digital take up (including increasing the number of small and medium sized enterprises and voluntary sector organisations that have websites) could add £63 billion value to the UK economy.

6. In this context, the development of wireless networking, known as *wi-fi*, is a way of widening access to broadband internet. Wi-fi allows people to access the internet through devices such as mobile phones, laptop computers and hand held tablets. In order to improve access, a number of local authorities now provide, or are in the process of providing, free publicly-accessible wi-fi in their areas.
7. In this context, the scrutiny panel sought to examine the possibility of providing free public wi-fi in Middlesbrough town centre. Having initially considered an overview of the topic area, the panel decided to broaden the scope of its investigation to also encompass the possible provision of free wi-fi in Council-owned buildings such as the Town Hall, libraries and the Golf Centre.
8. This report sets out the scrutiny panel's findings, conclusions and recommendations.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

9. The scrutiny panel agreed the following terms of reference as the basis of its investigations:
 - a) *To examine the possibility of Middlesbrough Council introducing free wi-fi in public areas in Middlesbrough, including options available.*
 - b) *To examine the possibility of providing free wi-fi in Council-owned buildings, such as libraries and leisure centres.*
 - c) *To investigate progress made by other local authorities in providing free wi-fi in their areas.*
 - d) *To investigate the possibility of the Council generating income from free public wi-fi provision*

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

10. The scrutiny panel investigated this topic over the course of five meetings held between 22 July and 13 November 2014. A Scrutiny Support Officer from Legal and Democratic Services co-ordinated and arranged the submission of written and oral evidence and arranged witnesses for the investigation. Meetings administration, including preparation of agenda and minutes, was undertaken by a Governance Officer from Legal and Democratic Services.
11. A record of discussions at panel meetings, including agenda, minutes and reports, is available from the Council's Eagenda committee management system, which can be accessed via the Council's website at www.middlesbrough.gov.uk.
12. This report has been compiled on the basis of information submitted to the scrutiny panel by Council Officers and relevant outside bodies/organisations, including other local authorities, social housing providers and Teesside University.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE SCRUTINY PANEL

13. The membership of the scrutiny panel was as follows:

Councillors P Sharrocks (Chair), BE Taylor (Vice-Chair), R Arundale, R Brady, JG Cole, P Khan, R Lowes, M Thompson and M B Williams.

THE SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINDINGS

14. The scrutiny panel's findings are set out below in respect of each of the agreed terms of reference.

**TERM OF REFERENCE: “To examine the possibility of Middlesbrough Council introducing free wi-fi in public areas in Middlesbrough, including options available” and;
“To examine the possibility of providing free wi-fi in Council-owned buildings, such as libraries and leisure centres.”**

15. Owing to areas of overlap, the above terms of reference are dealt with together in the following sections of the report. Information was submitted regarding:

- Work undertaken to date/progress.
- Options available and issues involved.
- Potential costings.

Work undertaken to date/progress in Middlesbrough

16. The scrutiny panel heard that, following the internet transforming the way in which people communicate and do business, there is an increasing public expectation that internet access will be readily available. This is reflected in an increasing provision of free wi-fi in shops, bars, cafes, restaurants and hotels and even on public transport.

17. This expectation has already been recognised by a large number of local authorities. These authorities have made free public wi-fi available in council buildings, leisure centres and libraries and also, in some cases, in public spaces. Examples of progress made by other local authorities follows in a separate section of this report.

18. The panel was advised that the need to investigate the possibility of providing some kind of free wi-fi in Middlesbrough has been recognised by the authority as it could potentially provide a local economic stimulus. This could be by increasing visitors' dwell time in the town centre. The system could possibly also enable other services to provide information in 'real time,' for example timetables for public transport and live updates for delays or cancellations.

19. Although detailed costings have not yet been identified, officers in Regeneration have begun to explore the issue and (as at August 2014) have submitted a capital funding bid of £50 000 for consideration as part of the Council's 2015-16 budget process. During the course of its investigation, the scrutiny panel indicated that it was minded to support the capital funding bid, with the Council's Director of Resources being informed accordingly.

20. Initial suggestions are that, if approved, the funding could be used to provide free wi-fi in Middlesbrough's Centre Square. This area could then be used by the public to access the internet for free on handheld devices and it was conceivable that such a service could attract people to visit, and remain in, the town centre.

Options available and issues involved

21. The Panel was advised that there are a number of different ways of enabling free access to wi-fi: These are, via:

- Cloud technology (in the simplest terms, cloud computing means storing and accessing data and programs over the internet instead of via a computer's hard drive).
- Mobile telephone masts through the transmission of 3G and 4G broadband internet.
- Installing the Council's own infrastructure.

22. The key determining factors that need to be considered when deciding which system to use are cost, speed of the internet and the scope of the geographical area. In terms of speed, it was highlighted that the cost of providing 4G broadband is likely to be significantly more expensive than for 3G.

23. The term 3G is shorthand for "3rd Generation" and refers to a networking standard in mobile 'phone technology that is capable of providing high-speed data service to mobile devices. The development of 3G wireless networks enabled mobile devices to connect to and use the internet at practical speeds - such as for the download of information, audio and video and to transfer files to other devices.

24. 4G stands for "4th Generation" mobile technology and is much faster than 3G. The best 4G services operate at the leading edge of speed and reliability and can be used to download files from the internet up to 10 times faster than 3G.

25. The scrutiny panel heard from the Council's Corporate Programme Manager, who provided an overview of the technical issues relating to providing free wi-fi in Council buildings that are accessible to the public and the process involved in commissioning free wi-fi in public areas of Middlesbrough.

26. If using Council networks to provide free wi-fi, there needs to be separation between public access and the Council network. The Panel was advised that access to local authority networks is governed by compliance with the national Public Services Network (PSN). PSN is the Government high-performance network that helps public sector organisations work together, reduce duplication and share resources.

27. In order to ensure PSN compliance, which is audited on an annual basis, the Council could separate the network using firewalls so that the public could access wi-fi. In order to do this an outline business case will need to be developed in the first instance. It is also noted that current PSN compliance does not permit access to Council networks using non-Council devices. The implications of this issue in terms of possible public access to Council systems will need to be addressed.

28. The Council has recently re-procured its Wide Area Network (WAN), with the roll-out expected to be completed by January 2015. A wide area network (WAN) is a network that covers a broad area and is used to relay data among employees and clients from various geographical locations.
29. The new WAN will provide improved network coverage and better connections, together with an opportunity for the public to link to free wi-fi provision (subject to PSN compliance/approval).
30. As part of the WAN solution the authority is looking to improve network connections to around 60 of its buildings, including central buildings such as the Civic Centre, Middlesbrough House and Vancouver House. It was suggested by the scrutiny panel that this could provide an opportunity to explore the possibility of using such buildings as hubs to enable the public to access wi-fi. The panel was advised that this could possibly be developed as part of the Council's Digital Strategy.
31. Current arrangements mean that access to Council systems via broadband is currently security protected so that only staff and Council Members are able to access it.
32. It was explained that the new WAN contract that the authority has negotiated is flexible and that the Council will be able to increase or decrease connectivity of buildings. This is likely to depend on the future size of the authority and the number of buildings required.
33. The scrutiny panel also heard that the Council is in the process of renewing its mobile communications contract. The authority will therefore work with the new provider on options around access to public wi-fi.
34. The future business requirements of the authority also mean that a faster, more resilient broadband service is likely to be required. The Council is examining options on how this can be best achieved. Reference was also made to the need to ensure that wi-fi is made available for officer/business use in buildings such as Middlesbrough Town Hall and Civic Centre - for example in meeting rooms. It was suggested that such provision could then be used as a hub to extend wi-fi provision more widely, perhaps to include public provision. It was indicated that all options would be explored - for example officers have viewed a demonstration of a 3G mobile router that can be used for up to 30 devices to receive wi-fi.
35. The scrutiny panel questioned whether the introduction of wi-fi (both in Council buildings and in terms of wider public provision) has been included in the authority's IT Forward Programme. In response it was explained that, to date, the Council has not had the necessary expertise in place to move forward on this issue. However, steps were now being taken to determine how this can be best addressed, including submission of the capital funding bid of £50 000 for public wi-fi provision that has been referred to earlier in this report.

36. Progress has been made in terms of overall Council information and communication technology (ICT). The Corporate Programme Manager advised that, over the past two years, capital investment of £8m has been secured; the roll-out of the authority's Desk Top Strategy (which will ensure that all Council staff work to the same ICT specifications is continuing); and the Council is looking to standardise software; investment has been made in the Melrose House data system and also in hardware/applications; and the new Agresso financial system, which will replace the existing SAP system, will utilise Cloud-based technology.
37. In response to a question from the scrutiny panel in respect of future use of The Cloud, it was advised that the authority has two security levels for information: 80% is subject to freedom of information requirements and is required to be maintained by the Council. This could potentially be hosted on Cloud technology. The remaining 20% is key Council personal data which will need to remain on Council servers.
38. It is therefore envisaged that Cloud-based technology will form an increasingly significant part of Council data storage and could be used as the optimum solution for wi-fi provision.

Potential costings

39. The scrutiny panel acknowledged that, as work on wi-fi provision is not very advanced at this stage, detailed possible costings are not yet known. However, the panel sought information on known costs and on issues that are likely to affect costings.
40. It is envisaged that, if transmitters were to be used for wi-fi provision, five or six nodes would need to be installed to cover Centre Square. Although detailed costs would need to be ascertained, it was envisaged that capital costs would equate to around £50 000.
41. Use of a system such as The Cloud would mean that there would be no capital costs involved, although the authority would need to pay rental costs.
42. It is noted that before detailed costings can be ascertained, decisions will be needed in terms of:
- What system would be used.
 - Whether any system adopted would cover only Council buildings, or whether public spaces would be included from the outset.
43. Subject to the above, officers have undertaken tentative discussions with mobile phone operators/service providers to explore possible systems, options available and potential costings. It has been ascertained that the cost of wi-fi provision will depend on the scale of the project in terms of the following:
- • Geographical coverage.
 - • Number of concurrent users.
 - • Connection speed available to each user.

44. The area of coverage is determined by the number of access points (APs) installed, the type of AP and the range that they cover. The cost of APs depends on whether they are located indoors or outdoors; the number and speed; and whether they were wired or wi-fi. The higher the number of system users, the more expensive the service would be to operate.
45. Preliminary work has indicated that it could cost around £200 000 to install between 20 and 40 outdoor APs for a 10 year period, including maintenance costs. This would not include additional costs that would be required to provide a wi-fi service covering Middlesbrough Town Hall, which could be problematic owing to its listed building status and thick interior walls. It was envisaged that up to an additional 10% could be required for maintenance costs, although this could possibly be included following negotiations at the contract stage.
46. Members were advised that there are systems available which could enable the required antennae/equipment to be installed on existing street furniture. This would be the least obtrusive and disruptive option of providing the required infrastructure. Planning permission could be required if new cabinets were needed to be erected on the street.

**TERM OF REFERENCE: “To investigate progress made by other local authorities in providing free wi-fi in their areas” and:
“To investigate the possibility of the Council generating income from free public wi-fi provision.”**

47. Owing to areas of overlap, the above terms of reference are dealt with together in the following sections of the report. Information was submitted regarding:
- Public wi-fi provision by other local authorities.
 - Private sector free wi-fi provision in Middlesbrough.
 - Teesside University’s free wi-fi provision.
 - Possible income generation from wi-fi provision.

Public wi-fi provision by other local authorities

48. The Panel was provided with information regarding progress made by a number of local authorities. A number of different service providers and solutions are used by the various local authorities. For example:
- Newcastle and Gateshead Councils are in the process of implementing a joint initiative to provide free public wi-fi across their respective city/town centres. This will involve the installation of a series of wi-fi hubs that are to be provided by an external telecommunications company at no cost to the local authorities. It is envisaged that the basic wi-fi system will provide 1MB access, which will be sufficient for internet browsing and to use social media feeds. A premium subscription service will also be available which will allow subscribers to access 6MB per second, for a monthly registration fee.

- Colchester Borough Council uses Arqiva, with the system offering 30 minutes free wi-fi access plus unlimited access to the Council website; to Visit Colchester and Job Centre Plus;
- Leeds and Bradford City Council's provider (Virgin Media Business) offers free wi-fi within a limited area in the town centre. This is done through a quid pro quo arrangement utilising Council street furniture to site 3G and 4G units;
- York Council initially undertook a trial of providing free unlimited wi-fi in the city centre, funded from existing Council budgets. Provision was extended to parks and park and ride terminals in time for Yorkshire hosting the Grand Depart of the 2014 Tour de France. The wi-fi network received over one million hits during the first three months of its operation, with York providing 1mb per second per device;
- Mansfield Council provides high speed Wi-Fi covering 480,000 square metres of the town centre;
- Bristol City Council has developed its Cityspace system, which combines the Council's own network with a university network;
- Great Yarmouth Council is working with a group that also provides CCTV coverage in the town centre utilising Cloud technology.
- In Glasgow city centre, free wi-fi was initially provided for 30 minutes, with charges levied for further use. As a result of public pressure, Glasgow now offers unlimited access to free wi-fi through an agreement with BT.

49. In addition, information was submitted to the scrutiny panel concerning free wi-fi provision in Glasgow, Hounslow, Kendal and York. It was highlighted that, in the case of some of the case studies produced as part of the scrutiny panel's research, funding was from the national Super Connected Cities Fund.

50. The super-connected cities will benefit from faster and better broadband for small businesses, with a voucher scheme launched to contribute towards the costs of connections for those businesses. In addition, almost all of the participating cities have used the funding to deploy wireless coverage to city centres and inside public buildings.

51. It was explained, however, that Middlesbrough had not been eligible to apply for this funding as only cities with a Royal Charter were allowed to bid for support from the fund.

52. The position in respect of the other Tees Valley local authorities (Darlington, Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton On Tees) is that all provide some form of publicly-accessible wi-fi. Locations vary but include main civic buildings, libraries and leisure centres. Redcar and Cleveland Council provide public 'break out areas' in its civic centre for the public to access free wi-fi.

53. None of the Tees Valley authorities currently provide public wi-fi in any open-space areas.

54. The Panel was also advised that other local public services, such as Cleveland Fire Authority and Middlesbrough Police already utilise wi-fi within their organisations. In addition, the Thirteen Housing Group has wi-fi provision in its offices.

Private sector free wi-fi provision in Middlesbrough

55. In line with the increasing public expectation that free wi-fi will generally be available, a number of retailers/shopping venues in Middlesbrough town centre now provide such a service, using a variety of systems. For example:

- The Cloud is used by Marks and Spencer, Cafe Nero, W H Smith, Wetherspoons and Walkabout ;
- O2 is used by Debenhams;
- Purple Wi-Fi is used by Cleveland Centre. The system filters the internet to restrict certain sites, in line with some of the other town centre solutions;
- Starbucks, McDonalds, Barclays and HSBC also provide free public wi-fi.
- Captain Cook Square utilises BT Open Zone. In order to use this facility, users are required to agree to receive commercial messages from the shopping centre and BT; and
- Hill Street Centre is in the process of installing free public wi-fi.

56. From the above, it can be seen that free wi-fi is readily available across the town centre.

Teesside University's wi-fi provision.

57. The Chair of the scrutiny panel met with Teesside University's Director of IT Services to obtain information about the organisation's on-campus wi-fi provision for students and staff.

58. The panel was advised that the university's wi-fi is provided through a secure, national, academic network. The network, which is cloud-based, is available all students and staff but not the public. Users need to log in using an ID and password.

59. In the course of a general discussion concerning wi-fi provision, the following points were highlighted.

- a) If the Council provides free public wi-fi in an area such as Centre Square, this could potentially be accessed by surrounding businesses - also free of charge. This could reduce network capacity/available band width.
- b) There is a need to be realistic about outdoor coverage and how much use would actually be generated. Would benefits outweigh costs?
- c) Wi-fi provision is more straightforward and easier to manage/control if it is contained in a building.

- d) Wi-fi could potentially be provided in Centre Square from transmitters located in the Town Hall/Civic Centre.
- e) 4G mobile phone coverage may be expanded substantially in the future. Notwithstanding the fact that this would be available by paid subscription, this service could potentially provide better and faster internet access than wi-fi.
- f) Public Service Network (PSN) issues concerning public access to wi-fi/separation of public bodies' networks can generally be resolved.
- g) Existing Council networks (eg the telephone network) could be used in conjunction with routers to provide wi-fi access in Council buildings, including remote locations.
- h) Misuse and security - concerning infrastructure and traffic management - are serious issues that do need to be addressed, particularly in the case of free public access to systems.
- i) It may be best to start small for guaranteed success - for example by providing free public wi-fi in Council buildings in the first instance.
- j) Before proceeding, there is a need for expertise in asking the right questions and understanding the answers. Teesside University's Director of IT Services indicated that, if necessary, this is an area where his organisation could provide free assistance to Middlesbrough Council.

Possible income generation from wi-fi provision

60. It was noted that Newcastle/Gateshead Councils' public wi-fi is to be provided at no cost to the authorities and is also anticipated to generate some income for them. Information was sought on whether there is potential for income generation in Middlesbrough.
61. The scrutiny panel heard that, in major conurbations, especially as 4G mobile phone coverage is expanded, telecommunications companies pay for the use of lamp posts and other street furniture to site the required antennae. For example, Camden Council was paid £500 000 by a company for the use of the Council's street furniture, plus a percentage sum of any revenue the company then received from leasing the street furniture to other companies.
62. Such a model works well for larger cities where there is a demand for 4G. Examples of arrangements include connecting wi-fi to existing CCTV systems, or giving public assets (such as lamp posts) to telecommunications companies, with the companies then being responsible for maintenance costs of the asset.
63. The amount that companies will pay to local authorities is therefore generally based on projections for future 4G demand in a particular area. Some local authorities have entered into 10 year contracts to allow companies to have exclusive access to the authority's street furniture for 4G antennae/small cell deployment. The company concerned will then generally sell-on the 4G coverage to mobile phone operators. In some cases, such agreements have included the company providing free wi-fi coverage as part of the contract agreement with the local authority.

64. Information was obtained from a national telecommunications company on anticipated future demand for 4G services locally. It was explained that, because of its relatively small size, Middlesbrough is currently in the bottom third of local authority areas in terms of potential demand for 4G services in the next 10 years.
65. This means that, at the present time, it is unlikely that there will be significant demand from telecommunications companies to enter into a concession with the Council to provide extended 4G services and an associated free provision of public wi-fi. .
66. A further point that was highlighted is that some companies are upgrading existing mobile phone macro sites in Middlesbrough to expand 4G coverage. This means that the companies may not therefore require the street furniture infrastructure as used in other locations.
67. However, depending on the wi-fi system used in Middlesbrough, it could be possible for the Council to raise some revenue from its provision. For example, reference was made to the Gateshead Metro Centre's public wi-fi system, which offers advertising opportunities for businesses/shops.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION - DIGITAL EXCLUSION

68. During the course of the scrutiny panel's investigation, Members heard of the increasing importance of people being able to access the internet and gaining basic computer skills. Reference was made to issues such as accessing online services to assist people into employment and to the increased emphasis that is being placed by the Government on online applications for welfare benefits.
69. The panel recognises that those in society are often the least able to afford the costs of the necessary hardware (laptops, personal computers, mobile phones or hand held devices) and internet access. This means that those who could most benefit from internet access can be excluded from it. The issue of *digital inclusion* was therefore investigated by the scrutiny panel. In simple terms, digital inclusion is about making sure that people have the capability to access, and use, the internet to do things that benefit them day to day.
70. The ¹National Housing Federation's website highlight's the importance of digital inclusion, as follows:
- Education and Life Chances - Home access to a computer and the internet can improve children's educational performance. If the 1.6 million children who live in families that do not use the internet got online at home, it could boost their total lifetime earnings by over £10 billion.
 - Employment and Skills - It is estimated that between 75% and 90% of jobs require at least some computer use. Being online also gives people more opportunities to search and apply for jobs.
 - Saving Money - Offline households are missing out on estimated savings of £560 per household per year from shopping and paying bills online.

¹ <http://www.housing.org.uk/policy/investing-in-communities/federation-support-for-community-investment/digital-inclusion/>

- Welfare Reforms - The benefits system is changing. A new Universal Credit will be introduced to replace many current benefits, including Housing Benefit and Job Seeker's Allowance. The Government wants 80% of applications for Universal Credit to be online by 2017 and is developing and promoting a Digital Inclusion Strategy, to increase the number of people accessing the internet.

71. The scrutiny panel heard from a representative of the Thirteen Housing Group on steps that the organisation, and other registered social landlords, are taking to address the issue of digital inclusion in the local area. The following points were highlighted during the discussion.

72. Despite the increasing importance placed on digital communication by the Government - particularly with the forthcoming introduction of Universal Credit - Thirteen has ascertained that around 45% of its tenants have no internet access in their homes and only 13% have active e mail accounts. The organisation has therefore recognised the need to review how it communicates and interacts with its customers to ensure that all can access the necessary services and support.

73. An issue of particular concern is the Government's apparent focus on e mail being the future default method of communication for services such as Universal Credit. This could result in non-responses from tenants with the risk of benefits being sanctioned.

74. In terms of digital/electronic service access, two main groups of customers have been identified:

- Those who would like to use online services but face barriers such as lack of hardware or cost of internet provision. The cost of line rental can be particularly prohibitive in this regard. Mention was also made of telecoms providers charging up to £300 per flat to install a broadband internet connection in a high rise property.
- Older customers who would may be keen to learn about and use the internet but who lack the necessary skills and who need support to do so.

75. Thirteen has considered how it can best address the needs of both of the above groups. The scrutiny panel was informed of progress made to date.

76. Kiosks providing internet access have been introduced in the main contact centre and some high rise properties for communal use. The Thirteen Group is currently identifying sites for further kiosks and Members were invited to nominate any suitable community sites where a kiosk could be placed. The organisation is open to working with Middlesbrough Council, and other organisations, to take forward the issue of digital inclusion.

77. Contact Team personnel have been trained to become Digital Angels to support customers in accessing online services and Thirteen is committed to providing a national online e-learning range of packages, supported by the Tinder Foundation. This initiative aims to support people to access the internet for the first time and assist them in developing their skills. Where customers are referred through the Group's economic or financial inclusion teams as requiring support, this can be provided on a one-to-one basis either in their homes or in a community facility. Various training programmes are being developed to meet learners' needs, although it was explained that resource constraints limit the overall number of people that can be assisted.

78. Thirteen is also examining the possibility of promoting access to credit unions to assist people in obtaining loans to buy computer hardware; is exploring whether local providers can supply reasonably priced re-cycled hardware; and is also looking at low cost wi-fi options to see whether the organisation could provide internet to customers at a nominal cost.

79. In addition, the scrutiny panel heard that Coast and Country Housing, based in Redcar and Cleveland, has established a Digital Inclusion Group. Membership involves social housing providers from across North East England. The group's aims include promoting and increasing digital inclusion awareness, particularly in the social housing sector; improving residents' digital skills and increasing the number who have access to the internet; and addressing the challenge of providing free/affordable internet access for residents. Establishment of the Digital Inclusion Group had followed the recent demise of the successful national 'Go-on' campaign. This was a national campaign that was aimed at encouraging people to go on line.

CONCLUSIONS

80. Having considered the submitted information, the Economic Regeneration and Transport Scrutiny Panel reached the following conclusions:

1. Free public wi-fi internet connectivity has been recognised by Middlesbrough Council an issue that needs to be addressed - either in Council/public buildings or in public spaces, or both. In terms of public wi-fi provision, Middlesbrough is currently lagging behind other local authorities, both regionally and nationally. There is an increasing public expectation that wi-fi internet connectivity will be available. This has been acknowledged by retailers, businesses, hotels and public transport providers, all of whom have recognised that wi-fi provision can help to attract/retain customers. Public wi-fi provision by the Council could therefore assist in providing a local economic stimulus.
2. Various options of public wi-fi provision are available. Careful assessment will be needed of the advantages and disadvantages of each before a decision is made on exactly what system the Council could provide and in what locations. Cost will be a critical factor, both in terms of any capital investment required and ongoing revenue costs. However, the authority does not have the necessary expertise available in-house to fully develop public wi-fi provision. Assistance will be needed to make progress and ensure compliance with requirements relating to connection to the Public Services Network (PSN). In this context, there is an opportunity to learn from other authorities that have made progress on providing free wi-fi, or to tap into local expertise.
3. Notwithstanding the factors outlined above, and depending on what system is provided, there may be an opportunity for the Council to raise revenue from free wi-fi provision. The issue of future demand for 4G services is also of relevance as some local authorities have allowed use of their street furniture for 4G antennae-use in return for free public wi-fi provision. However, indications are that Middlesbrough is currently in the bottom third of local authority areas in terms of potential demand for 4G services in the next 10 years. Working with other Tees Valley authorities to encourage 4G provision to a bigger, combined population may be worthy of exploration.

4. The scrutiny panel's work has highlighted that the issue of digital inclusion is closely related to internet access and wi-fi provision. Nationally, there is an increasing expectation, especially at Government level, that public services will be accessed electronically in future. The fact that this will include the most disadvantaged members of society (many of whom do not have access to the internet) through the roll out of Universal Credit is of concern. Middlesbrough Council's ongoing partnership working on Financial Inclusion provides an opportunity to address the areas of concern.

RECOMMENDATIONS

81. Following the submitted evidence, and based on the conclusions above, the Economic Regeneration and Transport Scrutiny Panel's recommendations for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny board and the Executive are as follows:

1. That Middlesbrough Council takes action to provide free public wi-fi in main Council buildings and other public buildings such as libraries, community hubs, leisure centres, Middlesbrough Golf Centre and the new Sports Village.
2. That other local authorities that have successfully provided such facilities are approached to determine how this has been achieved. This should involve:
 - a) Ascertaining how issues such as Public Services Network (PSN) compliance have been resolved and network security has been maintained.
 - b) Accepting Teesside University's offer of providing free assistance/advice with these issues.
3. That a detailed assessment is made of the feasibility of providing free public wi-fi in Centre Square in Middlesbrough. This should include:
 - a) A technical appraisal of the options available.
 - b) Detailed costings (capital and revenue) to enable a decision to be made on whether or not free wi-fi should be provided.
 - c) Examining whether there is any possibility of free public wi-fi being provided at no cost to the Council.
 - d) Examining whether there is any possibility of the Council generating income from free wi-fi provision.
 - e) Ensuring that the necessary safety and security issues are addressed.
 - f) A final decision on the issue being made by the Council's Executive.
4. That the scrutiny panel's findings in relation to digital inclusion are drawn to the attention of the Council's Financial Inclusion Group. That group should be requested to ensure that the panel's concerns are addressed by continuing the work that is currently being undertaken with partner organisations and by building on the relationship that the authority has with Erimus/Thirteen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

82. The Economic Regeneration and Transport Scrutiny Panel would like to thank the following people for their assistance with its work:

- L Clark - Newcastle City Council
- K Coates - Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
- S Fletcher - Middlesbrough Council
- R Horniman - Middlesbrough Council
- P Lambert - Teesside University
- C Oates - Xentrall
- Y Phillips - Middlesbrough Council
- J Presch - Thirteen Group

BACKGROUND PAPERS

83. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- Reports to and minutes of the Economic Regeneration and Transport Scrutiny Panel meetings held on 22 July, 25 September, 2 and 23 October 2014.

COUNCILLOR PETER SHARROCKS

CHAIR - ECONOMIC REGENERATION AND TRANSPORT SCRUTINY PANEL

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