



# Northumberland

## County Council

### RECORD OF DECISION TAKEN BY LEADER

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**Title:** Capital investment for Schools Broadband service improvement

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Wearmouth

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#### **Decision Being Taken**

To pursue award under the Everything ICT Framework agreement to:

- a) enter into a 3-year contract with Comms World for a schools broadband solution at a capital cost of £743,642 and an annual revenue cost of £201,805. Total cost to the council over 5 years of proposal is modelled at £-44k as detailed in the attached business case.
- b) The service will be re-charged by the Council to participating Schools, but the costs to Primary Schools will be “smoothed” to render it affordable to them and provide all schools with a single competitive price regardless of location.
- c) The costs to High Schools will be passed on to them directly by the Council, however they may request they be “smoothed” by the Council to spread their initial setup charges over five years.

This service would enable the Council to provide all participating Schools with a 1GB (Gigabit) connection, over 100 times faster than most Primary Schools receive today, combined with a market leading filtering and safeguarding service and a comprehensive support service.

**Key Issues:**

- The Council currently provides approximately 105 Primary Schools and 6 High Schools within the Northumberland region with internet connectivity services, as part of its overall offering to Schools. This service is reaching the end of its life.
- Most of the Primary Schools currently receive an extremely slow service, delivered over legacy copper technology. Many schools are receiving sub-10MB services, which is no longer suitable to meet their needs. Department for Education guidance states that Primary Schools should be provided with a minimum of 100MB speeds, delivered over fibre infrastructure<sup>1</sup>.
- Schools require a fully filtered and secure connectivity service which provides real-time alerting of activity of concern, to support safeguarding of pupils when online.
- Due to advances in technology, the costs being paid by the Schools for this service is no longer competitive. This has led external providers to approach schools directly with alternative offers, and the schools community built by the Council is starting to fragment, with some schools having already moved to an external provider.
- Many schools, particularly Primary Schools, do not have extensive in-house IT capability, and rely on the Council service to provide such support.
- The Council has the unique opportunity to procure an alternative service, leveraging the size of the Schools community to deliver a service which delivers the required performance, service and value for money which would not be available in the market to individual schools.

## **Background**

The Council currently provides approximately 105 Primary Schools and 6 High Schools within the Northumberland region with internet connectivity services, as part of its overall offering to Schools. This internet service is not a standard home/business internet service, as it must also enable granular filtering and alerting of internet usage by individual pupil, staff member or visitor, utilising services approved by the Department for Education.

Schools are not obligated to take these services from the Council and can use any suitably capable provider in the market to do so – in this instance, the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/meeting-digital-and-technology-standards-in-schools-and-colleges/broadband-internet-standards-for-schools-and-colleges>

Council is effectively in competition with other market providers. However, the Councils view is that schools are “Stronger Together” – by leveraging their combined size and scale, the Council can provide a better service, at a more affordable cost, than the market can supply to schools on an individual basis. Furthermore, when combined with the Councils broader educational support offering, including IT support and curriculum services, the Council are able to provide schools with significant value, particularly to those schools who do not have a dedicated in-house IT function (such as Primary Schools).

The Council were recently awarded funding under the BDUK LFFN (Building Digital UK Local Full Fibre Network) programme to deploy fibre to most Council sites, including most schools. This is being deployed by BT Openreach and is reaching its conclusion. However, although installed, no active service has been procured on this fibre as yet, so it is not currently being used. There are also c.30 schools that have been migrated to Fibre Services under RGC (Rural Gigabit Connectivity) schools' pilot.

A procurement activity was initiated, and the Council released a Request For Proposal (RFP) on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 for a supplier to plan, design, migrate and manage the new solution. This was undertaken via an Education Services Framework, Everything-ICT, to speed up contract terms and conditions and procurement. The evaluation has now been completed, and a telecommunications provider Commsworld has been selected as preferred bidder.

Having reviewed offerings available from the private sector, and also the needs of Schools, it is the Councils belief that there is still a significant benefit in offering services directly to schools, particularly for Primary Schools, who do not usually have dedicated IT staff. By bringing Schools together as a community, the Council can leverage their size and scale to provide enterprise-level services at an affordable cost, something which schools could not procure independently.

Furthermore, the Council can consider alternative funding models across capital and revenue to suit, and modelling costs on to schools in a predictable, uniform manner, ensuring that smaller schools are not disadvantaged, and all schools can benefit.

Therefore, the recommended option is to procure a new service from the market, which meets the needs of the schools at an affordable cost, using the size and scale of the collective community, led by the Council, to do so.

## **Other Options Considered**

Information services and education have considered the following alternative options:

- **Do nothing and allow the market to provide services.** We could choose to no longer provide a schools broadband service and allow schools to seek their own provision individually. This would put schools at a disadvantage, as they would have to negotiate as a single organisation, and services for smaller more rural schools will be unaffordable.
- **Continue with service provided by current supplier.** This was deemed inappropriate given the feedback from schools on the current performance and costs, and, given the likely outcome of Schools leaving the Council and taking services elsewhere, would effectively result in the Council choosing to no longer provide service, as above.

### Implications Arising out of the Report

<b>Policy</b>	The recommendations of this report support the education priorities and the vision and values included in the NCC Corporate Plan.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	The recommendations of this report enable the Council to provide Schools and pupils with a best value service, which they could not procure individually.
<b>Legal</b>	Minimal – procured under Everything-ICT framework.
<b>Procurement</b>	Procurement already engaged and facilitated RFQ
<b>Human Resources</b>	No impact
<b>Property</b>	No impact
<b>Equalities</b> (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No impact
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	There is a risk that not enough schools sign up to the service, which could make it financially unviable. Key mitigations are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on market testing and discussions with Schools, the Council service represents good value for money, and an easy option for Schools, so they are likely to want to proceed with it.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contracts will not be signed with the Supplier until after Schools have provided commitment – if not enough schools sign up, it will not proceed.</li> </ul>
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	No Impact
<b>Customer Consideration</b>	Improved service to schools, children and broader service availability to residents.
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	Improved connectivity in communities can support home working and therefore contribute to lower carbon emissions from transport / commuting.
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>	Supports delivery of home learning and helps address digital inclusion, providing better connectivity across the region.
<b>Wards</b>	All

**Background papers:**

[Business Case for Investment to improve Schools Broadband Services](#)

**Report sign off.**

***Authors must ensure that relevant officers and members have agreed the content of the report:***

	<b>Full name</b>
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Carol Humphries
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	Jan Willis
Chief Executive (acting)	Rick O'Farrell
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Wearmouth
Leader of the Council	Cllr Sanderson

**Author and Contact Details**

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Report Author

## DECISION TAKEN

Leader of the Council

### **Subject: Schools Broadband Services**

**Consultation:** Director of IT Consulted with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, Cllr Wearmouth as well as Cllr Bawn as Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Corporate Services and Economic Growth and Cllr Flux as Business Chair

**Decision Taken:** To proceed with contracting with proposed supplier in order to secure broadband services for schools.

Signatures of  
Director/Officer/Portfolio Holder



Cllr Glen Sanderson  
Leader of The Council

20<sup>th</sup> June 2022



Jan Willis – S151 Executive Director of  
Finance

15<sup>th</sup> June 2022

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**Date: 20<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

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