



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE : FULL COUNCIL

DATE: 22ND FEBRUARY 2023

Delegated Decision - Capital investment for Schools Broadband service improvement

Report of: Cllr. Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of Council

Officer: Jan Willis, S151 Officer and Executive Director of Finance

Purpose of report

To inform Full Council of a delegated decision made by the Council's s151 Officer and Executive Director of Finance under the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules

Recommendations

County Council is recommended to note the delegated decision that was made.

Link to Corporate Plan

Thriving – investing in transport, digital and connectivity. Ensuring connectivity for businesses, requires upgrades to transport & digital infrastructure

Key issues

- The council provided connectivity services to 111 schools through the council's Wide Area Network contract (WAN)
- The services provided to schools were coming to end-of-life and no longer suitable for the modern connectivity needs of schools.
- Many schools were complaining about the speed and performance of their connections.
- The WAN (Wide Area Network) contract is ending in September 2023 and schools would benefit from new improvements as part of the WAN, however this would result in schools remaining on their existing slower networks until a new WAN contract was procured, and services commissioned and installed.
- A comprehensive procurement exercise was conducted to expedite improved connectivity services for schools, separate from the Council's WAN
- The procurement exercise yielded an option to move to an improved service for all schools in an NCC SLA, with reduced revenue costs but with capital investment needed for infrastructure.

- An urgent decision for capital investment was made in consultation with the Leader on the 20th June 2022 and was supported by a comprehensive business case demonstrating the cost benefits.
- The decision required investment above delegated limits and therefore an urgent decision needed consent of the leader.
- The decision was outside of the budget framework and so needed consent of the Chair of Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- In accordance with Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules this decision is required to be reported to full council.
- This report was erroneously omitted from the full council meeting following the decision, due to an administrative oversight.

1. Background

- 1.1. The Councils Wide Area Network (WAN) contract provides connectivity to all council sites, and schools that sign up to the broadband SLA.
- 1.2. The WAN contract expires in September 2023 and a separate procurement exercise was undertaken but did not conclude until November 2022
- 1.3. Many schools in the SLA with NCC were unhappy with the performance of the connectivity service and needed a solution sooner than what would be provided by the new WAN procurement.
- 1.4. A decision was taken to procure services on behalf of a large number of schools to enable the provision of lower-cost, high-speed connectivity through an SLA between NCC and Schools.
- 1.5. The decision was within the delegated powers of the s151 Officer and Executive Director of Finance and was considered urgent.
- 1.6. The investment was above delegated limits in the Finance and Contract Procedure Rules and so was made with the consent of the Leader as it was an urgent matter.
- 1.7. The decision was outside of the Budget and Policy Framework and so was made with the consent of the Chair of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the The Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules. Those rules also state at section 4(2) that:

Following the decision, the decision taker will provide a full report to the next available Council meeting explaining the decision, the reasons for it and why the

decision was treated as a matter of urgency.

1.8. The delegated decision was reported to Cabinet on 14th February 2023.

1.9. The decision, reasons for the decision and reasons for urgency are set out below.

2. The Decision

2.1. The delegated decision is attached at Appendix 1 – the decision approved the recommendations in the attached report to the decision. These were:

To pursue award under the Everything ICT Framework agreement to:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

3. Reasons for the decision.

3.1. A full business case detailing the associated cost benefits and wider benefits was approved by the Portfolio Holder and the S151 Officer on 15th June 2022
A summary of benefits are listed below:

3.2. The overall cost to the council over 5 years of proposal is modelled at £-44k as detailed in the business case.

3.3. Our existing services no longer met the needs of schools and are not affordable.

3.4. We have undertaken a procurement activity and identified a partner and solution which can provide high bandwidth services to schools, supported by a

comprehensive, enterprise grade managed service.

- 3.5. We will leverage the Local Full Fibre Network deployment undertaken during 2021-22 to deliver 1GB services to participating schools, ensuring we fulfil the terms of the LFFN grant funding agreement.
- 3.6. We will support safeguarding of all children utilising internet services at schools through comprehensive Department for Education approved filtering and real-time monitoring of all activity, enabling swift interventions.
- 3.7. We will provide IT support services to Primary Schools which do not have their own dedicated IT function, enabling them to focus on pupils and delivering learning.
- 3.8. The new services are cost-neutral over five years, and deliver a 37% reduction in annual revenues, but require an upfront investment of capital to deliver.
- 3.9. Through maintaining a community of schools, we will continue to drive value and collaboration for schools in Northumberland.
- 3.10. Broader social benefits can be delivered through the increased availability of internet services within key regions, made possible through this decision.

4. Urgency

- 4.1. The matter was considered urgent as the contracts to enable this project to proceed needed to be completed urgently to provide continuity of services to schools for the next school term.
- 4.2. Any delays added a significant risk that schools would opt out of any NCC SLA, meaning that remaining schools, would be burdened with higher, potentially unaffordable costs for broadband services.
- 4.3. The long lead times to secure the required hardware and infrastructure would be further delayed by navigating usual procedures and would result in further extensions with current providers and in some cases would result in schools having to secure their own services at a much higher cost.

Implications

Policy	The recommendations of the associated report support the education priorities and the vision and values included in the NCC Corporate Plan.
Finance and value for money	The recommendations of the associated report enable the Council to provide Schools and pupils with a best value service, which they could not procure individually.

Legal	None other than as set out in the report. The report must be reported to Full Council under the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules
Procurement	None other than as set out in the report.
Human Resources	None
Property	None
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Risk Assessment	None
Crime & Disorder	No Impact
Customer Consideration	Improved service to schools, children and broader service availability to residents.
Carbon reduction	Improved connectivity in communities can support home working and therefore contribute to lower carbon emissions from transport / commuting.
Health and Wellbeing	Supports delivery of home learning and helps address digital inclusion, providing better connectivity across the region.
Wards	No Impact

Background papers:

Appendix 1 – [Record of Delegated Decision and Report \(Attached\)](#)

Report sign off.

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

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Neil Masson
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis

Relevant Executive Director	Jan Willis
Chief Executive	Rick O'Farrell
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Richard Wearmouth

Author and Contact Details

Chris Thompson. Director of IT (Chris.Thompson01@northumberland.gov.uk)