

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

DRAFT BUDGET 2017-18; BROADBAND

SUBMISSION FROM ALVAH AND FORGLEN COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Summary

Alvah and Forglen is a rural area comprising some 300 households and a population of about 1000. The economy is largely agricultural with a number of small to medium sized businesses.

Despite Audit Scotland warnings that rural areas must **not** be excluded from the superfast broadband roll out, the Community Council has been informed by Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) that there are no plans to include the area.

Alvah and Forglen Community Council (AFCC) is extremely concerned that its area will not have adequate digital infrastructure to take part fully in the modern age. AFCC believes that for the area to develop, fast and affordable broadband is essential for businesses, households and education.

Alvah and Forglen has fallen well behind the rest of the country in the provision of **adequate** let alone fast broadband.

Introduction

Alvah and Forglen is an area of about 65 sq. kilometres. There are about 300 households and a population of about 1000. The economy is largely agricultural with a number of small to medium sized businesses. There are no schools, shops, post offices or banks within the area. The nearest towns are Banff and Turriff. Both towns have access to fibre broadband, as have our neighbours in Portsoy, Aberchirder, and Cornhill. Increasingly, residents in Alvah and Forglen would prefer to work from home either full time or part time but are severely hampered by slow broadband speeds. The Community Council has engaged with DSSB and Community Broadband Scotland (CBS) to establish the level of broadband speeds in the area and gauge the desire for a faster affordable solution.

Alvah and Forglen Community Action Plan

In 2015, AFCC engaged with the community to establish priorities for the area. Better broadband came top of the list. AFCC engaged with Aberdeenshire Council, DSSB and CBS to establish the options available for the community. It emerged that Aberdeenshire Council had contributed £16M to help the fibre roll out to rural areas but these funds seem to have gone into the central pot and not been directed to rural areas.

Following a well-attended public meeting in Alvah in July 2016 it became clear that Alvah and Forglen was not to be included in the fibre roll out. CBS advised that AFCC should conduct a survey to establish the current level of provision and the level expected by the community. AFCC issued a questionnaire to every household in the area (280).

Analysis of Questionnaire Returns.

- There was a 30% return rate to the questionnaire. (64 households and 20 businesses).

- Every respondent wanted an improved broadband service.
- Only 2 households had a download speed of over 5Mbps
- The average speed of household broadband was 1.89Mbps
- The average speed of Business broadband was 1.43Mbps
- Only 1 business achieved more than 5Mbps (that by expensive satellite)
- 30% of household responders would work from home if they had adequate broadband

Comparison with rest of UK

- 96% of premises in the UK have access to speeds of more than 10Mbps.
- 90% of premises have access to superfast broadband.
- The average speed of superfast broadband is 63 Mbps.
- By the end of the current Parliament, the UK Government intends to introduce a Universal Service Obligation to ensure that all premises can receive a minimum of 10Mbps.

Alvah and Forglen is clearly falling behind the rest of the UK and our nearest communities by a huge margin.

Importance of broadband to Alvah and Forglen.

Equality of opportunity Effective broadband is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity and all parts of the country should have equable access to the service if all parts of the country are to have fair competitive opportunity to grow their economy. Some 14% of the UK working population work from home. People in rural areas should not be deprived of this opportunity because they cannot get an adequate broadband service. The AFCC questionnaire highlighted that large number of people **would** work from home if they had a broadband service that would support their business.

All businesses depend on the internet to communicate with their customers and suppliers. The Scottish Government insists that farmers make their returns via the internet. It is unacceptable that no business in Alvah and Forglen has a download speed of more than 5Mbps (other than one with an expensive satellite system). Lack of broadband provision will simply accelerate the decline in the rural economy.

Inward investment. Like many rural parts of Aberdeenshire, Alvah and Forglen needs more than farming to sustain the area. Whilst it is important that established businesses develop and expand, it is also essential that new businesses and young families move in. To attract such inward investment the area must be an attractive and viable place for people to live and work. Opportunities will be severely limited unless the area has ready access to fast broadband.

Education. Broadband is now an integral part of the education system. Children of all ages use the internet as a research and homework tool. A poor service will only reinforce the disadvantage

that rural children experience and deter families from moving into the area, resulting in an ever increasing older population.

Keeping in Touch. Socially, the internet is probably more important to rural areas than cities. In rural areas, unless you have good broadband, contacting government, council services, booking holidays, making travel arrangements, shopping or simply keeping in touch, becomes a time consuming and sometimes costly activity.

Delivering Expectation. Audit Scotland in its report of August 2016 stressed that “the fibre roll out had concentrated on the easier to reach solutions. However, there is a lot still to be done by the Scottish Government if it is to achieve its vision of a world class digital infrastructure, particularly in improving download speeds in rural areas. It’s important that it continues to monitor the cost and progress of broadband rollout so that these communities aren’t excluded”. AFCC has seen no sign that it is to be included.

Conclusion.

The Scottish Government promises that 100% of Scotland will have access to superfast broadband by 2021. It also reports that 4840 miles of new cable has already been laid and that 3000 new fibre street cabinets have been installed. Rural areas in the Outer Hebrides and other remote areas of Scotland enjoy superfast broadband.

Alvah and Forglen, less than 50 miles from Aberdeen and with a number of major towns nearby, could hardly be described as remote. However it is well behind the rest of Scotland in access to affordable superfast broadband and is not to be included in the fibre roll out. This failing must be addressed as matter of urgency.

Alvah and Forglen must have parity with the rest of the country and be given the cover promised by the Scottish Government otherwise the area will cease to be an attractive and viable place in which to live and bring up a family.

Alavan and Forglen Community Council
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