BRIEFING FOR THE COMMITTEE FOR THE ECONOMY

PROJECT STRATUM – PROGRESS REPORT

Background

1. The Committee will be aware that Project Stratum will deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to over 76,000 premises across Northern Ireland. These premises are distributed across primarily rural areas, classed as NISRA Band H – settlements of fewer than 1,000 and open countryside. Some 97% of the target intervention area is 'rural' under this classification.

2. A contract was awarded to Fibrus Networks Ltd on 13 November 2020. Fibrus Networks proposes to provide broadband services using Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) technology to 76,233 premises across the target intervention area. FTTP is a fully future proofed technology, offering speeds of up to 1 gigabit per second. This will mean that the rural areas benefitting from the project will have access to the highest broadband speeds available to consumers across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

3. Through engagement with Fibrus Networks and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the project team has identified the required funding to be utilised under the headroom funding provision of the contract to address the 2,517 harder-to-reach premises that are currently out of scope of the contract, along with additional eligible premises identified as a result of updated premises classifications made by Land & Property Services to the Pointer dataset (which helped inform the intervention area for the project under State aid rules).

4. In August, the Secretary of State for DCMS announced additional funding of up to £25m to address premises that are currently out of scope, along with premises that were excluded from Project Stratum because of the issues with the Pointer database. NI Block funding, comprised of joint bids by DfE and DAERA, will also make a contribution towards addressing these premises, subject to final approvals and State aid Assurance from Building Digital UK (BDUK), expected in November 2021.

Intervention area

5. The Committee will be aware of the breakdown of the premises to benefit from the project across Constituency and local council areas. The tables are attached again below for ease of reference:

Improvement by Assembly Constituency

Table 1

CONSTITUENCY	NGA Coverage before Stratum	Premises to be passed by Stratum	NGA coverage after Stratum	Percentage of Premises to be passed by Stratum
BELFAST EAST	99.5%	258	100.0%	0.5%
BELFAST NORTH	99.8%	105	100.0%	0.2%
BELFAST SOUTH	99.8%	120	100.0%	0.2%
BELFAST WEST	99.8%	92	100.0%	0.2%
EAST ANTRIM	95.3%	1,874	99.8%	4.5%
EAST LONDONDERRY	93.6%	2,883	99.6%	6.0%
FERMANAGH AND SOUTH TYRONE	73.7%	12,269	98.8%	25.1%
FOYLE	99.8%	59	99.9%	0.1%
LAGAN VALLEY	92.1%	3,650	99.8%	7.7%
MID ULSTER	77.9%	8,785	99.5%	21.6%
NEWRY AND ARMAGH	82.9%	8,101	99.5%	16.6%
NORTH ANTRIM	86.2%	6,529	99.5%	13.3%
NORTH DOWN	98.1%	806	99.9%	1.8%
SOUTH ANTRIM	88.0%	5,203	99.7%	11.7%
SOUTH DOWN	80.2%	9,042	99.6%	19.4%
STRANGFORD	89.5%	4,236	99.7%	10.2%
UPPER BANN	95.1%	2,630	99.9%	4.8%
WEST TYRONE	75.5%	9,591	99.1%	23.6%

Improvement by local council area

Table 2

LOCAL COUNCIL	NGA Coverage before Stratum	Premises to be passed by Stratum	NGA coverage after Stratum	Percentage of Premises to be passed by Stratum
ANTRIM AND NEWTOWNABBEY	92.0%	4,932	99.8%	7.8%
ARDS AND NORTH DOWN	95.0%	3,684	99.9%	4.9%
ARMAGH CITY BANBRIDGE AND CRAIGAVON	88.6%	10,080	99.7%	11.1%
BELFAST	99.9%	154	100.0%	0.1%
CAUSEWAY COAST AND GLENS	90.3%	6,268	99.6%	9.3%
DERRY CITY AND STRABANE	94.2%	3,545	99.6%	5.4%
FERMANAGH AND OMAGH	71.2%	14,821	98.9%	27.7%
LISBURN AND CASTLEREAGH	93.6%	3,914	99.9%	6.3%
MID AND EAST ANTRIM	92.2%	4,694	99.7%	7.5%
MID ULSTER	78.4%	12,289	99.4%	21.0%
NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN	83.6%	11,852	99.6%	16.0%

Project Highlights

6. Since the last update, the key highlights of the project to the end of September are:

- First consumers connected in Coalisland area.
- Build completed in 3 of 53 areas namely Coalisland, Killyleagh and Killkeel.
- Recruitment and training of over 380 new staff (Fibrus and Sub-contractors) completed/underway.
- Announcement by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), confirming additional funding for Project Stratum, to contribute towards addressing premises that are currently beyond the scope of Project Stratum, as well as premises that were omitted from the target intervention area due to issues with the Land & Property Services Pointer dataset.

Progress To-Date

Survey and Planning

7. Planning the deployment of each area of the Stratum network requires completion of a number of activities as outlined below:

- HLD (High-Level Design) – A full premise-level design for each milestone area, with corresponding detailed maps of existing infrastructure planned for use, or areas identified where new infrastructure needs to be provided.

- NOI (Notification of Intent) – Formal notification to Openreach that Fibrus are requesting access to the network to install additional services across and within their infrastructure.

- TRR (Test, Rod & Rope) – Physical access to the Openreach infrastructure by Fibrus engineering teams to check availability of duct access (identification of duct blockages etc.), install ropes within ducts ready for fibre cable installation; checking of integrity of poles etc. This activity is the most labour intensive of all planning activities, and Fibrus report that there is higher degree of inaccuracy associated with Openreach Physical Infrastructure Access data than expected, which can sometime delay progress.

- NAs (Network Adjustments) – Network Adjustments are formal requests to Openreach to rectify issues found within their network infrastructure during the TRR activity. Whilst any rectification on blocked ducts can be undertaken directly by Fibrus civil engineering teams, rectification on overhead network (e.g., telegraph poles) has to be completed by Openreach.

- LLD (Low-Level Design) – Following completion of the TRR activity, updated information provided on any proposed changes to design (to overcome issues) to create the final design documentation.

8. Work has completed in 3 deployment area and is underway in a further 15 deployment areas and summarised in the table below. This includes engineering activity to access duct routes, repair damaged duct, replace missing ducts and make ready access chambers. Visible engineering works will be seen in these areas, including temporary roadworks and road closures:

Table 3

	HLD	NOI	TRR	NAs	LLD
Coalisland	√	√	√	√	√
Killyleagh	√	√	√	√	√
Warrenpoint	√	√	√		
Ballycastle	√	√	√	√	√
Kilkeel	√	√	√	√	√
Maghera	√	√	√	√	√
Portstewart	√	√	√	√	
Enniskillen	√	√	√	√	
Castlewellan	√	√	√	√	√
Ballynahinch	√	√	√	√	√
Ballymoney	√				
Castlerock	√				
Carnlough	√				
Keady	√	√	√		
Castlederg	√	√	√	√	√
Cullybackey	√	√	√	√	√

Build

9. Build of the network comprises installation of fibre optic cabling, using both underground and overhead network infrastructure. Progress of the build began in Coalisland (first planned area), and the first pole was planted at the same time as the contract was being signed. Work currently underway and completed includes:

- Poles – Erection of new telegraph poles to extend the reach of the network.
- Civils – Insertion of new underground duct to extend the reach of the network or provide work-around solutions to existing Openreach capacity issues.
- Fibre – Installation of fibre optic cabling, both underground in duct (U/G) or overhead on poles (O/H).

10. At the end of September, Fibrus have planted 2,407 poles, installed 36km of duct and completed 559km of fibre cable.

Issues Faced

11. **Covid 19**: Fibrus Networks has advised the Project Team that official Covid-19 guidance introduced this year impacted crew/build team sizes for a period, capping the number of individuals in each team and the proximity in which teams can operate. This resulted in productivity limitations in terms of days allocated for

works completed to date, as well as time projected to complete these tasks. To mitigate the risk of delays to implementation, Fibrus brought forward plans to introduce a second contractor, and improved the survey and planning process to minimise the risk of additional time being required during build. The pandemic has also had an impact on the manufacture and availability of some of the components for the network build, but the contractor has adapted well to these challenges by expanding supply chains.

12. **Premises Passed:** Any delays encountered earlier in the year continue to be eased by these measures and deployment will not impact the phasing of the roll-out in line with contractual obligations, including overall completion of the project by March 2024 for the 76,000 premises eligible for intervention. To date, Fibrus Networks has completed infrastructure deployment work in support of more than 10,000 premises through Project Stratum, with deployment work for a further 5,000 currently underway. Fibrus Networks are on target to pass 19,500 premises by the end of 2021, meaning that these premises will have access to gigabit capable broadband services. Furthermore, Fibrus Networks are confident that they will have caught up fully by March 2022, with all phases on target. The project team continues to engage with Fibrus Networks on this issue and progress will be closely monitored by the Project Board.

13. **EU Exit:** Whilst availability of some materials are still impacted, the Fibrus procurement team has continued to work with key suppliers, adjusting forecast orders and timing to ensure that any potential delays are kept to a minimum and not milestone impacting.

14. **Access to existing Openreach network**: As the build is being undertaken in the most rural areas of the country, the build team is finding that the existing Openreach network infrastructure has not been accessed for a considerable amount of time and, in a number of instances, are finding manhole covers in-accessible, in many cases under tarmac roads or overgrown verges etc. Fibrus is also experiencing a significant amount of tree-cutting being required to enable fibre cabling to be completed. The build programme has managed to overcome some initial delays resulting from specific network infrastructure related adjustments provided by Openreach.

Stakeholder Engagement

15. The DfE and Fibrus teams have engaged with key stakeholders and provided presentations and enquiry support, including:

- Virtual events in Castlewellan, Cullybackey, Castlederg, Warrenpoint, Maghera, Ballynahinch, and Enniskillen.
- Fibrus have met with Fermanagh & Omagh and the rural issues group of Derry and Strabane Council.

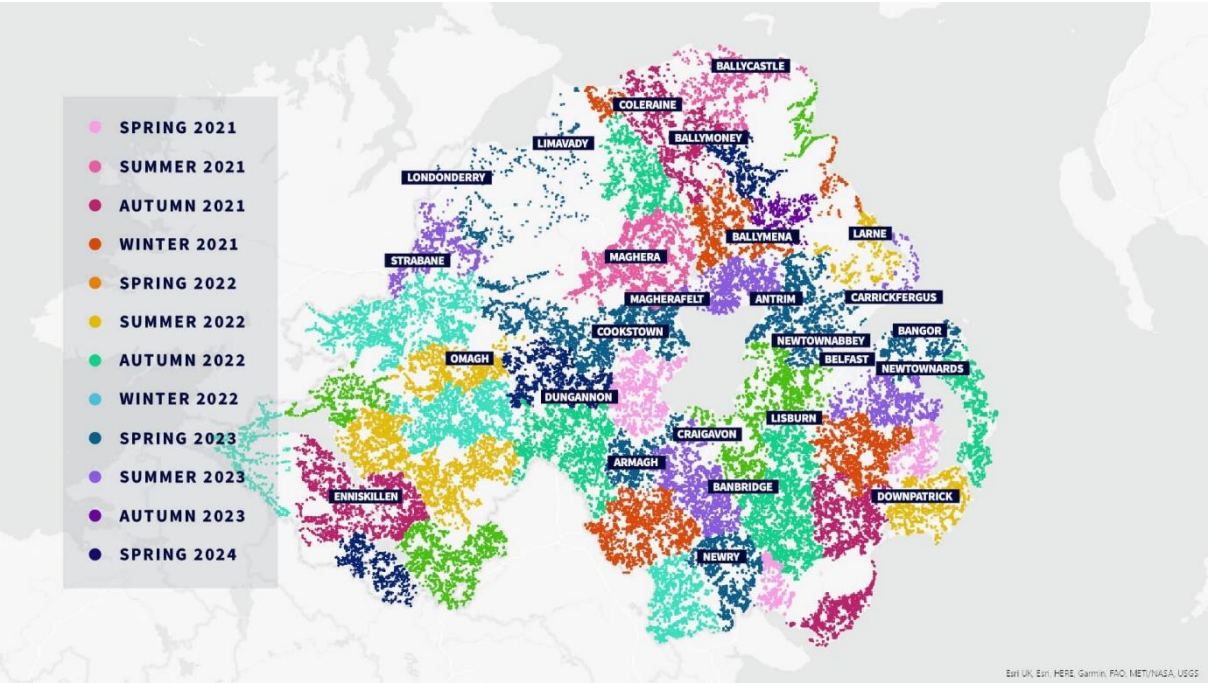
Online premises checker – Where and When

16. Fibrus has developed and released an address checker ahead of schedule and this is now available via the HyperfastNI website (www.hyperfastni.com). Also

available are high-level maps showing deployment plans at Constituency and local council level. These are attached below for the Committee's information:

Maps

NOTE: Dates shown in the respective maps reflect the current forecast for the build plan. This will be subject to change as the programme progresses.



Employment

17. Fibrus and its suppliers are recruiting and training locally. For Stratum, Fibrus has recruited against 159 new roles. In addition, Fibrus now has 17 new entrant trainees (NETs) contributing to the Social Considerations commitment.

18. Through subcontractors working on the project over 212 new roles have been created.

Department for the Economy
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