Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Cabinet – 28 March 2022

Report Title
Rotherham Town Centre Wi-Fi

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
No, but it has been included on the Forward Plan

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report
Judith Badger, Strategic Director of Finance and Customer Services

Report Author(s)
Susan Gray, Service Manager, Digital Services
Susan.gray@rotherham.gov.uk

Ward(s) Affected
Boston Castle

Report Summary

To present an update on the potential options to provide free public Wi-Fi within parts of Rotherham Town Centre.

Recommendations

1. To agree to the delivery of free public Wi-Fi provision to the new town centre library and markets development.

2. To explore the potential for providing free public Wi-Fi within other areas of Rotherham town centre, utilising existing Council buildings and assets.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 PART A - Initial Equality Screening Assessment

Appendix 2 Carbon Impact Assessment

Background Papers

Report: Free Public Wi-Fi for Rotherham Town Centre
Cabinet & Commissioner Decision Making Meeting – 21 May 2018

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
No

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Rotherham Town Centre Wi-Fi

1. Background

1.1 Cabinet agreed at its meeting on 21 May 2018 to the delivery of public access Wi-Fi across Rotherham Town Centre through a concessionary contract.

1.2 The Council tendered a concessionary contract in December 2019 to provide a free public access Wi-Fi solution for Rotherham town centre and identified a chosen supplier in January 2020.

1.3 However, by November 2020, the Council had been unable to progress the formal award and enter into contract with the chosen supplier due to changes within the company, and a general lack of engagement from them in progressing the contract award. As such the Council took the decision to withdraw the award and abandon the procurement.

1.4 Council officers have been investigating alternative options since the procurement was abandoned and have held a number of discussions with commercial organisations and telecommunication providers already working with the Council, with a view to looking at the feasibility for alternative delivery methods. The pandemic has impacted the timescales associated with furthering this work.

2. Key Issues

2.1 The landscape for the provision of free town centre Wi-Fi has changed considerably since RMBC initially agreed to procure a concessionary contract. Consequently, many other local authorities have either abandoned their provision or find themselves in a situation where concessionary contracts aren't achieving the level of projected income for the chosen supplier to make them viable.

2.2 This has been attributed to the communications market significantly reducing the cost of personal data bundles on mobile devices and more town centre shops and cafes offering free Wi-Fi to customers. A small number of local authorities are investing in multi-million-pound digital infrastructure projects of which free public town centre Wi-Fi is a part, which makes it more commercially attractive.

2.3 The abandonment of the procurement, along with the change in landscape, results in very little commercial appetite to provide town centre Wi-Fi within Rotherham.

2.4 Discussions with current suppliers engaged in improving connectivity within the Rotherham borough resulted in a poor response to offer a potential solution. However, on further exploration these would require a greater level of certainty, commitment, and investment by the Council in order to de-risk the commercial uncertainties for the supply market and make the opportunity more attractive.

The options now available to the Council are set out below.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 **Option 1:** The Council's ICT Service provides the infrastructure, management and support of a free town centre Wi-Fi offering.

3.1.1 Feasibility of Option 1: ICT staff do not currently possess the highly specialised technical skills and knowledge to design, deploy and manage a public wireless infrastructure across the town. As a provider the Council would need to conform to the necessary compliance and regulatory regimes associated with commercial infrastructure providers. This option is not considered viable, nor affordable on a sustainable basis.

3.2 **Option 2:** Commission a third-party provider to deliver a free town centre Wi-Fi offering at a cost to the Council.

3.2.1 Feasibility of Option 2: Market research has been undertaken to identify potential costs for delivery. Two organisations were engaged in this work. The first of which showed initial interest but has since withdrawn from the market. The second offered a free site survey however this was caveated with a requirement that the Council enters into contract with them to provide the full deployment. Given the unknowns in terms of potential investment costs and to ensure compliance with public procurement law, the Council could not commit to this. In addition, the ongoing redevelopment of the town centre hinders a potential supplier's ability to validate footfall data and carry out "line of sight" surveys and accurately map and identify buildings and street furniture required to support the deployment of a wireless network.

3.3 **Option 3:** Explore the potential to utilise Council building assets to extend the Council's current corporately managed free public Wi-Fi network to key areas of the public realm (e.g. Forge Island and Snail's Yard) within Rotherham town centre and as a minimum to incorporate as part of the new library and markets development. The enclosed market area was identified as the priority area within the original procurement and was a key area in which a free town centre Wi-Fi would benefit the market traders and customers alike.

3.3.1 Feasibility of Option 3: This would be technically feasible as it is in effect an extension of the type of public Wi-Fi offered within community libraries and other public buildings. The limitations would be the areas of public realm where this might be possible, without significant additional investment.

3.4 Recognising the change in demand for free town centre Wi-Fi, reduced appetite within the commercial sector and looking to limit the risks and cost implications for the Council, option 3 is most viable. However, this is a significant change from the original aim and planned coverage.

3.5   Other Information

Notwithstanding the options highlighted above, the Council is about to embark on a range of digital inclusion initiatives, one of which is a 'baseline assessment' for Rotherham, which will be used to inform the development of the digital inclusion strategy and accompanying action plan. It is recommended that the Council uses this opportunity to assess the demand for free town centre Wi-Fi to ensure there is still a need for some form of provision and where this would be feasible and most beneficial.

4.   Consultation on proposal

4.1   Public consultation will be carried out via a short online survey on the Councils website to identify what members of the public would like and where Wi-Fi would be of use to them.

4.2   The wider work on Digital Inclusion, most notably the baseline assessment for Rotherham, will be used to ascertain the level of need for free public Wi-Fi within Rotherham town centre.

5.   Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1   Assuming Cabinet agree with the broad direction and recommendations outlined in the report, the Assistant Director for Customer, Information and Digital Services will be responsible for the work required to explore the extent to which the chosen option can be deployed, the costs and indicative timescales.

5.2   If agreed, the provision of free public Wi-Fi for delivery in the new library and market development will follow the timetable associated with that scheme. It is therefore proposed that this element of the Wi-Fi project will be reported on as part of any update on the new library/markets scheme.

6.   Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1   Key procurement updates have been provided throughout the main body of the report. Where there is a need to engage third party providers to support / deliver elements of the proposed recommendation this must be undertaken in accordance with the Public Contract Regulations 2015 (as amended) and the Council's own Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules.

6.2   The Report seeks approval to change the approach for providing Wi-Fi within the Town Centre. At present this report does not propose any additional cost pressures as the recommended option needs to be fully investigated to establish the financial implications. Where possible any additional costs arising from the recommended option will be factored into the Councils ICT capital projects and revenue budgets to cover any asset investment and ongoing maintenance. Should the review and assessment of the recommended option present additional costs above what can be absorbed within the existing budget provision the service will need to identify additional capital and revenue funding streams.

6.3   The potential inclusion of the proposed Markets and Libraries investment will need to be reviewed in detail to ensure that the proposed new building is suitable and that any use of this new building falls within available budgets.

7.   Legal Advice and Implications

7.1   It has been confirmed that the initial contract award has now been terminated.

7.2   Additional legal advice will be required should the Council decide on a future procurement option.

8.   Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1   There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

9.   Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1   Not all mobile device users have access to broadband within their own home or mobile tariff and therefore this service would extend that opportunity and improve accessibility and support digital inclusion.

9.2   The service will apply all Safeguarding and Information Security policies to the Wi-Fi provision (in line with policies applied to free RMBC Wi-Fi in public buildings) to protect the vulnerable groups within our community. Content filtering will be applied in line with RMBC public Wi-Fi policies.

10.   Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1   The proposed plans for the town centre will enhance the public open space(s) and provide opportunities for town centre users to socialise together. The improved open space will also provide additional areas to hold events in the town centre, further providing opportunity for increased social interaction. Equipment and furniture etc. will be selected to ensure it is accessible and suitable for all users. Safety improvements will be made to ensure the town is a welcoming environment, including improved lighting and the removal of steps and raised areas (where practicable). Additional disabled parking is being introduced on College Street which will enable users to park in the Town Centre.

10.2   Overall, there are no significant differential, positive or negative, equality impacts from the provision of free town centre Wi-Fi. However, access to the internet more broadly affords the opportunity to connect with family and friends, provide access to goods and services at reduced cost and take advantage of special promotions and offers only available online.

11.   Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change

11.1   The Carbon footprint of mobile devices, consuming Wi-Fi, and internet services account for about 3.7% of global greenhouse gasses and emissions. These emissions are predicated to double by 2025. (Source: Mike Hazas, Lancaster University).

11.2   According to Google's own figures, however, an average user of its services, someone who performs 25 searches each day, watches 60 minutes of YouTube, has a Gmail account and accesses some of its other services, produces less than 8g (0.28oz) CO2e a day. According to Facebook's sustainability report, a user's annual carbon footprint is 299g CO2e, which is less than boiling the water for a pot of tea.

11.3   The use of mobile devices and the consumption of Wi-Fi and internet services at a Rotherham Town Centre level is impossible to calculate at this stage as the Council is unable to predicate levels of usage of any deployment.

11.4   Overall, the decision to deploy free public Wi-Fi is not considered to have a significant effect on the Council's carbon reduction ambitions. A Carbon Impact Assessment has been completed and included in the report.

12.   Implications for Partners

12.1   It is intended that Rotherham town centre market traders will be able to access unlimited, free, and secure Wi-Fi and internet services whilst carrying out their day-to-day business.

13.   Risks and Mitigation

13.1

Risk	Description	Mitigation	Impact and Probability
ICT staff do not currently possess the technical skills and knowledge to design, deploy and manage a public wireless infrastructure across the town.	As a provider the Council would need to conform to the necessary compliance and regulatory regimes associated with commercial infrastructure providers.	Commission a third-party provider to deliver a free town centre Wi-Fi offering at a cost to the council. Alternatively, RMBC could limit the scale of the provision to the Rotherham indoor market area and deploy RMBC public building Wi-Fi services.	High, High
Reputational risk from an inappropriate access	It is possible that some people, including potentially vulnerable individuals could access inappropriate internet information or	A full filtering service will be delivered as part of the contract which will exclude access to commonly regarded inappropriate materials e.g., drugs, violence,	Medium, Low

	images through the free Wi-Fi.	pornography. However, it is inevitable that some inappropriate material can be accessed from any internet connection that is filtered.	
Reputational risk from a poor-quality service	Examples of poor-quality service include: a poor-quality customer experience for access, registration, and use; poor coverage; poor upload and download speeds; periods of unavailability. There is also a risk that RMBC could become liable for legislative obligations under DPA and RIPA.	RMBC will engage with a third-party supplier in the design, delivery, and rollout of the service.	Medium, Low

14. Accountable Officers

Steve Langrick, Head of Digital Services
Luke Sayers , Assistant Director Customer, Information & Digital Services

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	14/03/22
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	08/03/22
Assistant Director, Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phil Horsfield	09/03/22

Report Author: Susan Gray, Service Manager, Digital Services
Susan.gray@rotherham.gov.uk
This report is published on the Council's website.