Item 9 - Question Time

To the Leader of the Council

Question

"Can the Leader provide members with an update on progress towards improving broadband and mobile phone connectivity in Highland following discussions at the last meeting of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands?"

Response to Mr D Millar

Ensuring that the Highlands and Islands becomes a digital region has been an important theme of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands for some years. High speed digital connectivity is an enabler of both economic and community benefits, contributes to business competitiveness and aids sustainability and growth of fragile communities.

Over the last few years good progress has been made in addressing the region's connectivity challenges. However, ambitions and aspirations continue to grow, and while current activity is a welcome start, delivering digital connectivity across the entire region will require further work.

At last meeting of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands meeting in Elgin on 5 October, 2015 members discussed Digital Connectivity in the Highlands and Islands

The Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband fibre rollout programme is being led by Highlands and Islands with a £146m project funded by Scottish Government, UK Government, HIE and BT, will deliver superfast broadband to a minimum of 84% of Highlands and Islands premises by the end of 2016. An important component of the Highlands and Islands project is the building of a backhaul network comprising 800km of a land-based fibre and 400km of subsea fibre laid via 20 subsea cable routes.

A second phase to the fibre rollout programme is currently being modelled to define the potential reach of additional investment. Through a combination of Scottish Government and UK Government funds, an indicative £25m of a Scotland-wide sum of £42m may be available to extend fibre reach in the region. Subject to such modelling, the target will be to increase fibre coverage to c90% across the Highlands and Islands

In addition to backhaul, access to superfast services is now available to over 95,000 premises via the HIE/BT programme. When combined with BT's commercial rollout, over 135,000 premises in the region can now access fibre broadband.

The current fibre rollout will not reach every part of the region. Community Broadband Scotland was established to support communities to gain access to faster broadband where the market and the significant intervention under the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband programme will not deliver next generation

broadband. Community Broadband Scotland is actively supporting 87 pipeline communities across Scotland to explore broadband solutions. These projects could potentially provide services to 16,000 premises.

The initial funding for CBS, £5m has been augmented with an additional £2.5m to 31st March 2018. In addition, CBS will be the delivery partner for £9m via the Scottish Rural Development Programme over the period 2015-2020, to deliver the Rural Development – Broadband Programme.

Mobile connectivity is increasingly regarded as every bit as important as fixed broadband. While the fibre rollout, the associated investment in backhaul, and the introduction of new points of presence across the region, will make it easier and cheaper for mobile operators to get access to the services required to link mass sites back to the core networks, a coherent plan for mobile coverage has thus far been missing.

Representatives from BT, EE, Three, O2 and Vodafone UK attended the Convention meeting and discussed:

- What extent could coverage could be increased through current and new technologies?
- How best could coverage clarity be obtained to provide communities with quality information on which to base community broadband projects?
- What were the key constraints facing mobile operators delivering in the Highlands and Islands, and how can they be addressed?
- What more could be done to build on the encouraging take-up levels and encourage greater exploitation of digital connectivity?
- What steps can partners take to facilitate connectivity rollout, eg in relation to planning, business rates, mast sites etc?
- Could more be done, individually and collectively by public sector participants to increase availability and use of digital public service across the region?
- How can region develop the digital skills and literacy to ensure that the opportunities of enhanced connectivity are maximised?

Following constructive discussion it was agreed to come together in a responsible collaborative space to enable connectivity in the Highlands and Islands to be taken forward in a way that has not previously been possible.

To achieve this, it will be necessary to have all matters on the table including access to operational plans (with suitable safeguards in relation to commercial confidentiality), but also consideration of how the planning process, access to public sector land and buildings and non-domestic business rates amongst other matters can support connectivity roll out.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise will lead this work, in partnership with the Scottish Government's Digital Directorate with all members Convention of the Highlands and Islands being actively engaged.

Members wish to move at pace, with the first fruits of this collaboration tangible within a month.