

Redistribution of Budget – Upgrade of Portrush Wi-Fi	11th December 2018
To: The Leisure and Development Committee For Decision	

Linkage to Council Strategy (2015-19)	
Strategic Theme	Resilient, Healthy & Engaged Communities Accelerating our Economy and Improving Economic Prosperity
Outcome	Council will work to develop and promote stable and cohesive communities across the Borough
Lead Officer	Head of Prosperity and Place
Cost: (If applicable)	£30,000 within existing year budget

The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Members to upgrade Portrush public Wi-Fi, using underutilised budget from completed projects within the Prosperity and Place budget.

Background

A joint initiative by the Department for Social Development, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the legacy Coleraine Borough Council saw the installation of free Wi-Fi in Portrush on a two year pilot basis, in 2013. This was one of the first public Wi-Fi installed. It was stated that “the North Coast resort town will benefit significantly from this investment which will allow controlled, free internet access for shoppers, traders and visitors to the area and will complement other recent regeneration projects already completed in the town.”

Coverage extends from the harbour area of the town as far as the promenade beside the Arcadia, and reaches to the edges of East and West Strand, using Main Street as the main linear connection.

A limited public perceptions survey of the general availability of Wi-Fi in Portrush was undertaken in 2016. The general picture was positive, with good knowledge of the existence of public Wi-Fi, regular and repeated use, and support for continued use/further provision of the service. (100 respondents)

Since 2013, Coleraine, Limavady, Ballycastle, and Ballymoney have also installed free Wi-Fi. Other “public” areas in the Borough have also benefitted from the installation of Wi-Fi, including on a paid basis.

Current situation

The current public Wi-Fi system in Portrush is now approaching the end of its useful life. Physical routers can suffer from hardware failure, and the technology used has been superseded several times over.

The following table highlights the main statistics for usage in Portrush. This excludes detail on Device Portal Interactions – which is the total number of Wi-Fi enabled devices detected across all access points. Despite the age of the current routers and other equipment, it remains a popularly-used service.

Population (DEA: NISRA 2011 Census)	6,454
Devices on Network. Total number of devices logged on to town Wi-Fi network (sixteen months 1 st July 2017 – October 2018) <i>NB. Assume that most people will have only one device logged on to town Wi-Fi; some people may have more than one device logged on</i>	23,795
Percentage of Wi-Fi enabled devices detected logged on	25% (75% not logged on)
Average Devices on Network per month	1,487
Highest month	August (3,868)
Lowest month	January (477)
Percentage DoN in Borough	16%
Total number of Wi-Fi log-on ‘sessions’ in town (sixteen months 1st July 2017 – 31st October 2018). <i>NB. Some people will access town Wi-Fi once a day; others will access town Wi-Fi more than once a day</i>	57,065
Average number of log-on ‘sessions’ per month	3,566
Highest month	August (9,978)
Lowest month	January (1,128)
Percentage total log-on ‘sessions’ in Borough	12%
Most common device used to access Wi-Fi	Mobile phone (94%)
Cost per annum	£4,302
Percentage cost in Borough	17%

Benefits and alternatives

In terms of a tourist or visitor market, free public Wi-Fi is almost “expected”. Benefits of having public Wi-Fi include:

- Increased opportunities to profile and measure visitor numbers.
- Opportunities to offer advertising and marketing space.
- Linkages to QR codes and other above-the-line opportunities for local business.
- Encourage social media interaction, push out information to visitors and locals alike.

Officers have recently commenced a trial project with Velocity World Wide to examine the potential for personalised marketing using the Borough's public Wi-Fi. Within the next year, officers will be promoting the potential for Wi-Fi to become a small revenue stream using the existing networks.

In addition, Council is working with Tourism NI to see how the network can be used for increased data capture focusing on our visitor market.

In terms of alternatives:

- 5G has now been trialled by several areas. In a perfect environment, speeds of up to 10gb per second should be available. Although in real world environments, as was experienced with 4G, lesser speeds will be the norm. While the beginning of roll out will probably commence in 2021, it will be some time again before the network is fully implemented, and unlike public Wi-Fi, it will remain tethered to data plans and consumer costs.
- BT Hotspots are free if you are a BT Broadband or BT Mobile customer. All BT Broadband customers who've opted in will agree to securely share a portion of their Wi-Fi bandwidth through a separate channel on their hub. Similar services are offered by other providers. This can then result in a patchwork of provided Wi-Fi in enabled areas.

Summary and recommendation

Several projects for the current financial year are now complete. Budget has been identified which could be used to upgrade this service in advance of the larger influx of visitors expected in 2019. It will also improve the service for more regular visitors and locals alike. At present, there is no widely available alternative to replace the public service.

Existing figures show extensive usage across the year, with the obvious peaks in the summer season.

It is therefore recommended that existing budget is utilised to request quotes for the upgrade of the infrastructure of Portrush Wi-Fi.