

Minutes of Coquetdale Cluster meeting held on Friday 23rd June 2023 commencing 245pm in the Dovecote Room, Jubilee Institute, Rothbury

39.1 Introduction and welcome

J Famelton (Chairman), A Tait, F Tait, J Ragdick, C Palframan, J Sutton, C France, A Milne, R Aplin, J Scarpa, (Parish Cllr's), S Bridgett (County Cllr), A M Trevelyan (M.P.), C Miller (Clerk)

39.2 Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

39.3 Election of Chairman

J Famelton proposed and seconded as Chairman and duly elected.

39.4 Election of Vice Chairman

Election of Vice Chairman deferred until next meeting.

39.5 Minutes of previous meeting held on Tuesday 4th April 2023

It was resolved that the minutes of the previous meeting held on Tuesday 4th April 2023 be accepted as a true record.

39.6 Meeting with Anne Marie Trevelyan, M.P. to consider analogue telephone switchover

A Milne advised there are a large number of residents within Coquetdale who have no access to non-analogue services, and having to pay internet charges in the future could cause problems to these residents during the cost-of-living crises. M.P. advised the switchover proposals were put on hold last year as solutions were sought for rural areas, and further to the report findings there was a commitment to find a solution. J Scarpa of Hesleyhurst parish commented the proposals had been slowed down but not stopped. J Ragdick stated the Openreach web-site states once an area has 75% internet coverage, the switchover can go ahead. There were problems with maintaining copper in the future, and a resilient system required. Whitton & Tosson resident had no power for ten days, which was frightening. J Scarpa asked why the copper system was too expensive to continue with. M.P. advised the reality being moving to a fibre network is a whole other network to maintain, with copper too costly, and it would be too costly to maintain both systems. To have both is unviable and fibre is so much better and multi-purpose. The fibre needs to be resilient to the type of threats, such as electricity failure. With no consistent mobile services in the valley, new masts are being erected in the area, but only one company is willing to install masts with a generator. The Coquetdale County Cllr is requesting all masts have back-up generators. C Frances would like to see a policy where all masts have a back up generator and powered by renewable energy. M.P. stated there are challenges.. The 4 new emergency masts within Coquetdale should be able to access the mast, and C France stated it should be government policy. The mobile telephone companies seem to find loopholes due to them being powerful. M.P. not sure this is true at a local level and planners are very strict about mast management/maintenance. The challenge of multi-company use, which results in less masts being required which reduces the impact and need. J Famelton stated a lower fee can be paid for a land-line service that has no internet, and would people then have to pay for phone and internet as a package. There are still quite a lot of people on a telephone package only. J Sutton of the opinion most damage from Storm Arwen was due to trees, if trenches dug throughout the country, could copper not be buried underground. Power are overhead, copper are mostly underground, to put the two together would result in people in the future not being able to maintain. J Sutton stated the original could still be there, and if a mast comes down, you are back to square one. The argument for this would be the economics of running two systems, the new technology has to be made resilient. The key is a system in rural areas that is resilient. A Milne concerned about elderly people that live at home, some care systems work from phone, people need to know they can get support if necessary, and may not be able to finance upgrades.

There is a requirement for the digital system to be connected to every home, and a pricing policy for a limited service should be made.

R Aplin asked why the Government can't insist full mobile coverage is achieved before landlines are cut up. As coverage has rolled out, the challenge has been to find a way. Across Northumberland, the County Council team have worked, the high tourist areas are not factored in, with data taken on the number of homes. BDUK continually push, waves of extra funding to reach the next stage of rural reach, but it has not been a perfect rollout process. The 4G world is nearly there, however 5G is now here. Policy of government, profit making areas should subsidise loss making areas. Government will subsidise loss making areas, but the number of engineers, planning regulations takes time. It has been a rolling challenge, simply with the number of engineers available. Government has underwritten the rural, hard to reach, uneconomic areas. J Scarpa struggling to hear the difference between BDUK – the body created when the roll-out started 10 years ago. There was a determination government activity would go digital, which was imp; possible without a technological roll-out, have the mandate given to them by government. B.T. own the original network, hardware and fibreware of the new system, other companies have put in their own networks. B.T. own the copper network and the new fibre network being installed. As they have moved forwards, they are making the assessments, and have been on a very good cautious rollout programme and hadn't considered the resilience question in rural areas, which had not been factored into their modelling. J Sutton advised even boiler controls are now powered by wi-fi, which causes problems for the elderly. Transitioning and price are challenges. Solar power works as the battery charges through the day, and once charged they will hold power for probably three days. This is a solution at the community hall level, which could be run in times of crises. Wind turbines could be useful in the Coquetdale environment, solar the most predictable renewal. The challenge being pricing. There is a vulnerable person(s) list, B.T. could be asked to design a power pack system for these people. As ever it will be price versus output. Battery cost is decreasing. A Milne stated the County Cllr is pushing for a new leisure centre in Rothbury, the pool has been shut for a number of years, but only fit for children. In Ponteland there is a new leisure centre with population of 11,000, Rothbury has 6,000 population and should have a new services. M.P. stated she was not aware of this, leisure provision is run by a separate company from County Council. The current centre was re-developed around 20 years ago. Kids should be able to access sport, adults and elderly should also have access to facilities. Travelling to service centres would lead to long travel times for young people.

The next meeting of the Coquetdale Cluster will be held on Tuesday 1st August 2023 commencing 730pm in the Dovecote Room, Jubilee Institute

The meeting closed at 340pm.