

Report to the Warminster Area Board – 4 March 2010
Report from the Community Area Manager

Access to Broadband in Rural Areas
Including a report on the work of the Upper Deverills Broadband Action Group

Background:

Access to broadband can improve quality of life through increased access to services and more flexible labour markets. New technology is enabling wider business opportunities, such as home-working. Rural broadband provision is not always as reliable as that in urban areas.

Internet use is higher than ever in rural areas and demand continues to increase. Yet there is frustration regarding the lack of speed and reliability of existing services. People who cannot access broadband are excluded from what are now basic services for a large section of the population.

In response to limited broadband access in the Upper Deverills, residents have formed an action group. The Upper Deverills Broadband Action Group priorities are to aim for a sustainable community, decrease rural disadvantage, achieve a basic broadband service and plan for the Digital Britain future, enable businesses to thrive through infrastructure, explore options/research/identify potential solutions and develop a professional assessment.

Upper Deverills Broadband Action Group

- Upper Deverills comprises 3 hamlets of 150 houses. Brixton Deverill 30, Kingston Deverill 73 & Monkton Deverill 47. Mostly residential, several farms & many residents trying to work from home.
- Brixton is served by BT Sutton Veney exchange & the other two by BT Maiden Bradley exchange.
- OFCOM state rural broadband take up is 59% of the housing total, so the group have predicated that the amenable base for broadband in the Upper Deverills is 89 houses.
- The group have surveyed broadband users. The response of 46 broadband users represents 52% of amenable broadband users. 11 non broadband dial up users also responded.

Key Findings

- Massive 74% of users are dissatisfied with the speed & only 24% are satisfied – speed is critical for download/upload
- 53% of respondents using broadband are satisfied with reliability but a significant 43% are dissatisfied.
- Speed tests show the vast majority of download speeds are 0.5 Mbps or under. A minority secured 1Mbps or more with a maximum download of 1.3 Mbps. There was considerable variability in speed amongst neighbouring houses.

- Respondents would like increased speed and higher reliability.
- Cost reduction in rural areas was also a concern. Suburban areas are charged the same/less but speed is considerably faster (up to 10+ Mbps).

The Wiltshire Council Perspective:

Wiltshire Council has a county-wide approach to rural broadband through a sub group of the Wiltshire Strategic Economic Partnership. The Wiltshire Rural Facilities Survey 2008-2009 included data on the state of broadband and mobile phone coverage.

There has subsequently been a more substantive research study to provide a comprehensive picture of broadband speeds throughout the County. This includes mapping existing broadband delivery infrastructure and identifies infrastructure that could be upgraded or harnessed to improve broadband delivery. The aim is to also provide a database that would enable Wiltshire Council to deliver its own programmes. The Council and local partners plan to lobby Government, the NDPG, the SWRDA, the infrastructure providers and others, with a view to continually improving broadband provision throughout Wiltshire.

In addition the South Wiltshire Economic Partnership are undertaking research to assess the level of service received by local businesses and some assessment of their needs in the Warminster Community Area.

The sub group has met with representatives from BT and Openreach. All BT exchanges in Wiltshire are broadband enabled and theoretically everyone in the county should have broadband access. In practice there are numerous local technical issues and there is no single solution. BT are trialling various technologies but most of these will only be available for the most dispersed communities. They are likely to require significant additional subsidy to implement.

There are very low cost solutions which people can try - usually fixing a simple back plate to the box where the wiring comes into the dwelling reduces signal noise and in many cases improves speed.

It will cost £billions to deliver a universal service in the UK of 2Mbs. It is not something that can easily be resolved as Lord Carter's Digital Britain Report clearly outlines. The scale and cost of implementing the infrastructure changes required is beyond the capacity of local funding.

Wiltshire Council is very interested to hear of project ideas, proposals and solutions that it can follow up.

Recommendation:

- a) That the Area Board receives a presentation from the Upper Deverills Broadband Action Group and initiates a discussion with those present.
- b) That the meeting identifies other areas experiencing similar problems as well as possible solutions.

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