

Broadband Speeds in Rural Luddenham

Luddenham is a very rural Parish situated just west of Faversham in Kent. It has less than 40 households which are widely dispersed geographically. The Parish has three farms, a number of home-based businesses and a very successful Academy primary school with about 215 pupils.

The BT telephone network structure unfortunately does not fit well with the Parish boundary since the Parish is served by 3 Cabinets. Teynham Cabinet 1 and Faversham Cabinet 13, which is situated at Oare, are both fibre enabled. Faversham Cabinet 14 which is situated at Ospringe is likely to be fibre enabled sometime in 2017.

Fast and reliable broadband speeds are essential for the economic viability and social wellbeing of the Parish. Speeds and reliability are very poor, however, even for households connected to the Teynham and Oare Cabinets which technically should be providing fast speeds. In a recent Parish survey, typical speeds for households which are fibre enabled are between 2 and 4 mbps. Some households have apparently managed to get faster speeds but probably at the expense of their neighbours and at significantly increased cost. The fastest reported speed by just one household is 7 mbps. The school which is fibre enabled has speeds of just 3mbps which is totally inadequate for its needs. Speeds for those households which are linked to the Ospringe cabinet and are not fibre enabled are between 1 and 2.5mbps.

The reason for poor speeds, even for fibre connected households, is simply the distance of the copper telephone wires from the cabinets and the very poor quality of the lines in use.

The Parish recently had a meeting with the Kent County Council Broadband Manager and member of staff from Openreach. The Parish argued that it should have its own Cabinet with all telephone lines in the Parish re-configured to it. However, the cost of installing such a Cabinet would be in the order of £50k. The cost of providing the network by underground cable, for a distance of about 1 kilometre would be about £100k. The total cost of a "Luddenham Cabinet" is therefore in the region of £150k. The cost of re-arranging the copper lines would be additional and is likely to be several thousands. Apparently there are also Ofcom rules which determine the conditions under which telephone lines can be re-configured.

In the KCC's current BT BDUK contract, the average subsidy amounts to £586 per property. There is an absolute ceiling on costs, called the "premises cap", which is £1,700 per property. The number of premises in Luddenham would therefore not be sufficient to justify the cost of installing a new Cabinet as it would be way over the premises cap. Moreover, in terms of public investment criteria, anything over £586 per property would not be sufficiently economic to be included in KCC's current plans since it has many fibre projects to complete which are well within this amount. In summary, on the current financial arrangements, Luddenham is never likely to receive speeds anywhere approaching the 10mbps that is being promoted under the USO.

I suspect there are many rural areas across the entire country in a similar position to Luddenham. According to KCC's Broadband Manager there are some areas in Kent which are still on "pay-as-you-go". Superfast broadband can be implemented in very rural areas if the Government is prepared to finance it! I am concerned by the recent comments made by the Mr Ed Vaizey, the Minister of State responsible for digital roll-out. The Telegraph newspaper reported his comments to a Parliamentary Committee in April that there was no

guarantee that every property would get 10 mbps and that there would be a potential cap on the amount of public funding if a particular connection cost many thousands of pounds.

My conclusions are that:

1. If your organisation wishes to see the roll-out of superfast broadband across the country then you need to accept that rural areas should be included and that this may be at a greater expense. This is essential if rural economies are to flourish.
2. You also need to question whether BT should be doing significantly more to maintain its network of copper telephone wires.
3. You need to accept that schools in rural areas should be given priority.
4. You need to insist that BT develops the technology to replace copper wires.
5. It is imperative that your organisation gathers the empirical evidence which shows exactly how bad broadband speeds are in rural areas. You should also take note that poor speeds do not mean lower ISP charges!