

Summary of public meeting about broadband on the Kings Reach Estate in Biggleswade

This is intended as a summary of the discussion at the public meeting on Tuesday 9th December in the Biggleswade town council chamber chaired by Cllr Bernard Rix. It is not intended as minutes and residents who spoke are not named individually; instead I have grouped themes of discussion etc.

1 Background

Purpose of the meeting

Cllr Bernard Rix provided some background and context for why the public meeting had been called. With over 40 people in attendance Bernard explained that one of the key aims of the meeting had been achieved in demonstrating the strength of feeling from residents about the delays in getting fibre installed and better broadband speeds delivered.

Natalie Doig also explained that as there definitely was an agreement to deliver fast broadband to the estate, the reason for this meeting was to put pressure on BT to provide clear and transparent information about when this work would be complete as they had missed their original deadline. Natalie also thanked the residents who had campaigned for the last 2 years to get us to this point.

Ofcom's new broadband map

Bernard explained that a new interactive map service from the communications industry regulator Ofcom was launched on the 9th December. The map allows you to search by postcode to receive an accurate summary of internet speeds. For the Kings Reach it clearly shows that speeds are below 1.5meg and there is 0% super fast broadband availability. Whilst the rest of Biggleswade experiences far more favourable speeds. You can find out more about the map and there is a link to it here:

<http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/phone/mobile-phones/coverage/interactive-map/>

Straw poll of speeds

Bernard asked if anyone was getting speeds of 2Mb/s and all but one person said no. Most people reported speeds of 1 or below.

Background to the campaign

Bernard went on to explain that he had only been involved in the campaign for the last 6 months after being asked by a resident to help. Previous to Bernard's involvement residents had tried numerous means of engaging with the developers, council and BT. A small group of residents had met with MP Alistair Burt in April to discuss the situation and consequently an agreement had been struck by the developers consortium and BT to deliver fibre to the estate.

Whilst waiting for confirmation of this agreement, Bernard set up a petition which received 200 signatures in one weekend.

This autumn letters were circulated to most residents from the developers consortium, which stated that BT were progressing with the works to deliver fibre with a timeline of completing works at the end of November 2014, so that orders for broadband could be made for delivery in December.

The last of these letters was delivered in mid November and residents already had doubts that the work was near completion. But the local MP and the developers consortium appeared in the local news paper (The Chronicle) claiming fast broadband for the Kings Reach was on track.

A week later it became apparent that this deadline was not going to met and Bernard enquired with all parties as to what the delay was. At this point in the meeting the statement from the developers consortium was read out.

2 Summary of statement from the housing developers consortium

Alun from the developers consortium was unable to attend as he had a prior engagement he could not cancel. However he was keen to attend any future meetings and had supplied a statement which Bernard was able to read out. In summary Alun explained:

This summer an agreement was signed for the consortium to fund the installation of fibre to the estate by BT.

The dates provided for completion were: infrastructure by end of November and delivery of super fast broadband to begin in December.

A programme of works was never submitted by BT to the developer even though there were frequent requests for this.

BT Openreach continually gave assurances that they were on target.

There was a very last minute legal request from BT Openreach which the consortium turned around quickly. At this point towards the end of November,

the consortium asked for another update and were informed by BT Openreach that there was now a delay for two reasons:

- A complaint had been made about the position of a cabinet
- Central Bedfordshire had suspended all road works during December.

This was particularly frustrating for the developers consortium because if they had been consulted about the position of the cabinet they could have avoided complaints. They also pointed out that as the Kings Reach estate is still private land the roads are not subject to Central Bedfordshire's December roadworks rule and work can continue in December.

The Consortium have promised to continue to put pressure on BT.

It was also noted that Alun from the consortium was genuinely frustrated with the delays and is keen to help, although later in this summary there are some questions which residents would like to submit to Alun and the consortium.

3 Summary of statement made by James Cushing Central Bedfordshire Council

James reassured residents that broadband speeds and the issues on the Kings Reach estate were high on the council's agenda. The council had facilitated discussions between BT and the developers, which led to the contract being signed in the summer. Like the consortium of developers the council was only made aware of delays by BT very recently.

James could confirm that BT are looking for a new place to site the disputed cabinet in tandem with other cabinet works.

The council is very disappointed by the delay and will continue to put pressure on BT to deliver the works as quickly as possible. But James wanted to reassure residents that fast broadband will be delivered it is now just a matter of when.

4 Questions and answers from the discussion

There was then considerable public discussion including some questions which I have summarised below.

Q Can you confirm that fibre has been installed on to the estate?

A James confirmed that fibre has been installed along Baden Powell Way.

Q Is there any planning issue with moving or installing cabinets?

A No, planning permission is not required.

Q Can we just get Virgin to come and install fibre for us?

A No because the developers have an agreement with BT, Virgin and other competitors are not able to do any work until after the development is finished.

Q is there not a requirement within the planning permission to provide fast broadband?

A The planning permission for the Kings Reach does include the provision of broadband but doesn't stipulate what speed. This is something that has changed for new planning permission granted to developments which now stipulates super fast (24meg.) Some residents did look at the options for a legal challenge but the wording is not specific enough and broadband is still not listed as an utility.

Q Are there no penalty clauses in the contract the developer has with BT?

A This will need to be put to developer please see actions from the meeting at end of summary.

Q Will we be charged by BT to move / change the socket when fibre is installed?

A Again this is a questions BT need to answer and is included in the actions arising section.

5 Summary of discussion about how poor broadband speeds are affecting residents lives

Particularly to help the journalist from the Chronicle who was in attendance at the meeting residents were asked to explain how the poor broadband speeds were affecting them. I have grouped them below by theme.

Work

Almost everyone in the room said the slow broadband speeds were causing them difficulties in their work. At least half a dozen had actually had to travel elsewhere in order to carry out their normal work duties because of the poor broadband.

One resident was having to rent office space at some personal cost rather than work from home because of the broadband speed.

Another resident was paying £63 a month for satellite internet access so that they could carry out their job. This solution was expensive and still not as good as having decent land based broadband.

Another resident runs a security company and has to work from Caldecote because he needs to be able to monitor cameras and video, which is impossible with the broadband speeds on Kings Reach. They also said that other professionals they work with, like their accountant can't work from their premises on the Kings Reach.

Another person had tried to use a dongle using 3G for wifi but for his work involving video files this wasn't a viable option either as it was too expensive.

A few residents pointed out that their IT equipment was at risk as they were unable to keep their software updated as the broadband can't cope with downloading updates routinely.

The main ways broadband was affecting people's work were:

- Unable to take part in online meetings
- Unable to view files needed over the internet
- Unable to upload / share files / video / images needed for work
- Unable to work with other professionals locally because of the poor broadband - this means more travel to other places to have meetings etc.

Education

One resident explained that as she is doing an Open University course which is predominantly online learning, she is really struggling to access the materials she needs and her studies are really suffering.

Another young resident said that it was affecting his learning at school considerably, as he is often set homework to research information online including watching video online which he currently can't do at home.

Harming community and local economy

A couple of residents mentioned that along with the broadband issue they also had great difficulty getting a phone line installed. Combined with no broadband, no phone and poor mobile reception they felt cut off and vulnerable in their new home.

Another point raised was that the government and public sector are embarking on a “digital by default” agenda with public information, resources and services being moved online. If you can’t access these services because of your broadband you are being disadvantaged as non online services are being cut.

Another resident said that he wanted to run his company from Biggleswade and employ local staff but because of the broadband problems, he was commuting to London still to run his business there. The poor broadband is affecting the local economy as the jobs his company created have gone to people based in London rather than in Biggleswade.

Leisure and family

One resident spoke about the difficulty in using Skype or FaceTime with her sister in Canada. This means she couldn’t keep in contact with her sister and nephew in the same way as before she moved. Something her young nephew didn’t understand, he still wants to video chat with her and is understandably upset that he can’t.

Many residents have family locally or have moved on to the estate from Biggleswade and surrounding area, and knowing that broadband speeds are good in the rest of Biggleswade were shocked to find out how bad things are on the estate. Many spoke about sofa surfing with friends and relatives in the rest of town just to use the internet.

Residents said other leisure activities which are difficult or impossible to do are:

- Watch catch up TV
- Stream videos
- Play online games
- Hobbies like photography which involve uploading photos or viewing photos online
- Downloading music and audio books

6 Actions from the meeting

It was agreed that this summary of the meeting would be shared with those who attended and gave contact details, it will also be put on the Kings Reach forum and Facebook page and shared with the consortium, council, MP and Biggleswade Chronicle.

Bernard will attempt to get an update from BT in the days after the meeting.

It was requested that a more informal smaller meeting be set up in a local pub to look at how things can be moved forward. If you are interested in attending this type of meeting please email Natalie Doig on: kingsreachnat@gmail.com

A further meeting was proposed for January if we do not receive adequate answers to our questions.

A list of questions and demands be drawn up and submitted to BT Openreach and the consortium if they do not provide Bernard with adequate information.

The questions would include the following:

Question for the consortium

Does your contract with BT include penalty clauses for delays in delivering fast broadband on time? If so can you not use these to put pressure on BT?

Please can you update residents on progress before Christmas or at the very latest during the first week of January as the last communication everyone received said it was on time.

Questions for the council

Can you put pressure on BT by saying if they don't provide a plan of works and clear time line for work that you'll withhold permission for them to carry out works on other developments?

Questions for BT

Please provide a detailed plan of works for the consortium and council to see.

Please provide a clear timeline of delivery which can be shared with residents which includes when:

- cabinets are to be installed,
- fibre installation complete,
- works done on house sockets etc complete
- residents can order broadband
- when fast broadband will be delivered.

Please inform us if residents will be charged for changes to sockets etc and if yes how much?