

Roger Cashmore,
Oak House, 27 The Glebe,
Thorverton,
Devon
Tel: 01392 860 053
Mob: 07904 625 321
Email: cashmorer1@gmail.com
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Dear Editor,

I have been following your coverage of the rural broadband issue for some months now and congratulate you on being able to see both side of the picture. However I now feel the need to write to you personally as I believe the amount of Propaganda is warming up

If everything is going so well with this Broadband program, why do you think Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) and BT feel the need to continually use your journal, (and all the other local news media) to devote huge amounts of column inches to propagate their “good news messages”? While I understand that your organisation may be hard pressed to cover all the local news, it would be great if, in the interests of balanced journalism, you could consider telling another side of the story?

A little context. - BT has used £50mil+ of state funds provided by CDS to roll out connectivity to 95% of the two counties. The built in unfairness of the current program is now becoming increasingly obvious. The Central Government framework agreement provided by Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) is a “tick box” exercise that allows BT to spend public funds and install services anywhere, and at any time, that maybe commercially expedient to them in order to meet their targets. During the public funded programme BT has conducted little or no public consultation, no public needs analysis whatsoever, under resourced the roll out so that most of the publicly announced deadlines were woefully missed. (I do concede the roll out is now picking up at the end of the programme). They have, however, worked really hard to keep the all the important details of the program away from the public gaze by wrapping them up in Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs)

To refer to this particular article, BT suggests that it is willing to work with communities that are currently out of program and get them to co fund and invest with BT in order to get decent connectivity to their deprived communities. Why should a community, without any rational explanation or reason, be arbitrarily designated as “out of programme” by BT just because their antique network structure is too expensive to upgrade? To add insult to injury, they are now apparently being asked to use their own funds to get something as vital as digital connectivity! All this, when maybe in the next village the whole cost has been met totally out of public funds?? If the Victorians rolled out our water services likes this, many of us would still be going to the stream with a bucket!

This article’s community message is the same as a recent press release from Gavin Patterson, the MD of BT.¹ I feel the real reason you have received this particular article at this time is surely that the BT PR machine needs to counter the increasing pressure they are finding themselves under. The calls from all over the country for BT to demonstrate increasing transparency, provide far better

¹ The Scotsman “Gavin Patterson: Achieving a Digital Scotland” <http://www.scotsman.com/news/gavin-patterson-achieving-a-truly-digital-scotland-1-3909418>

quality of service, separate Openreach from BT and allow more competition from other service providers. The performance of the program is also being increasingly put under the spotlight in Westminster² including a debate on Monday 12th calling for a "Not Spot Summit".

While all this is going on the public outcry from the disadvantaged South West rural communities is also now getting much louder, - hence this article outlining BT's offer to work with disadvantaged communities in order to co finance the installation of a decent service. This apparent largess from BT is all too little, too late. The reality is in the past BT have:-

- a) wasted public funds by building over the top of existing community funded installations(!)³
- b) quoted communities outrageous prices (£hundreds of thousands!)⁴, to discourage them setting up their own service,
- c) prevented deprived communities from taking up other sources of government grants, by promising to provide them with a public funded service and then changing their mind, leaving communities with no government support whatsoever⁵

I think this kind offer is completely disingenuous. In fact it took the community of Claverton highlighted in the article by BT over three years to conclude their negotiations! They also ended up paying BT over £48K (including VAT!) for a couple of kilometres of duct and the same on poles (!)⁶ These sort of sums are just not viable for most rural deprived communities!

The Editor of ISP Review notes *"It's of course possible to read this story in one of two ways. On the one hand it shows that BT has the capacity to adapt and deliver a useful service by working with a very small community, but on the other hand it's arguably sad that the community felt it had no other option than to donate money to get better broadband. "*

Until there is strict governance of this program this type of behaviour will continue. This programme is nothing short of discrimination and community apartheid, many communities will become increasingly disadvantaged and may not even be considered for inclusion till 2021 and beyond!

Digital connectivity is now a 4th utility, if 95% of the area of Devon & Somerset were unable to obtain water or electricity, I am sure your newspaper would be publishing a different type of article!

I do hope you can consider taking some of these important points on board and that maybe you will be able to publish in my opinion?

Yours Sincerely

Roger Cashmore

² <http://www.computerweekly.com/news/4500255335/Somerset-MP-brands-council-incompetent-over-BDUK-fiasco>

³ B4RN Lancashire have had a part of their network built over by BT

⁴ Uppottery in the Blackdown Hills have been quoted £500,000 (!) for a short distance of fibre cable

⁵ DCMS grant withdrawn from Rousden in Somerset, Contact Councillor Rod Boyce

⁶ Read about Claverton <http://www.ispreview.co.uk/index.php/2015/05/tiny-somerset-village-of-claverton-co-funds-bt-fibre-broadband-rollout.html>