

Dear Editor,

On September 10, the North Devon Journal reported the statements of BT South West Region, Partnerships Director, Paul Coles to the North Devon Council executive meeting on September 8<sup>th</sup> (See <http://www.northdevonjournal.co.uk/BT-Broadband-North-Devon-people-businesses-need/story-27784776-detail/story.html> ). The purpose of the meeting was to update members on the roll out of Superfast Broadband in North Devon. Along with statistics for the number of “properties passed” by BT’s commercial fast broadband programme and the Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS) publicly funded programme, Mr Coles added “*There are certain individuals who are particularly vocal about broadband issues in the area, who might be putting off businesses relocating here*”.

Mr Coles may not like customers criticising BT’s progress in deploying fast broadband, be it on a competitive basis in urban areas or publicly funded via CDS in rural areas, but before he points fingers at everybody else, he should examine his company’s performance in more detail:

On Sept 2, the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) published their report of the Top Ten Counties in England to run a rural business in (See <https://www.cla.org.uk/rural-policy-advice/agriculture-rural-business/cheshire-tops-table-best-place-run-rural-business> ). Along with planning and the availability of skilled employees, the report looks at rural broadband connectivity and provides a league table of fast broadband availability by county. Devon and Somerset are in the bottom four counties in the league table.

On Sept 3, the Place Scrutiny Committee of Devon County Council convened an extraordinary meeting to examine the activities of the County Council run CDS programme. (See [http://www.devoncc.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast\\_interactive/186635](http://www.devoncc.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/186635) ). This followed the collapse of the £35M contract negotiations between BT and CDS on June 26<sup>th</sup>, for the Phase 2 CDS programme to provide a minimum 95% “superfast broadband” coverage across the two counties. DCC & SCC press releases both state the reason for a contract not being agreed as “BT’s inability to provide a value for money offer”. (See <http://www.connectingdevonandsomerset.co.uk/decision-for-the-second-stage-roll-out-of-the-cds-programme/> ). This has left Devon & Somerset as the only two counties in England without a plan for getting fast broadband to 95% of their population and now that EU approval for state aid to the telecoms industry expired on June 30, State Aid approval specifically for Devon & Somerset has to be renegotiated by HM Government with Brussels and it will take up to 9 months before the two counties find another supplier, assuming the money does not disappear before then. The CLA, the Federation of Small Business and the NFU petitioned the DCC Scrutiny Committee on the poor state of broadband in Devon & Somerset at the Sept 3 meeting.

Businesses in rural Devon & Somerset are already moving to the towns because they cannot service their shop windows (their websites) at the poor broadband speeds they are forced to suffer and once they are gone, others will not replace them. Selling your home in a slow broadband area is not going to be easy either, now that Rightmove make broadband speeds very clear when you search for a property to buy (See <http://www.rightmove.co.uk/broadband-speed-in-my-area.html> ).

BT and CDS are very keen to quote the number of “properties passed” by their deployment of fibre broadband cables, but to paraphrase Benjamin Disraeli; *There are lies, damn lies and BT/CDS*

*“properties passed” statistics.* This is because, using their “Fibre To The Cabinet” mechanism for deploying fibre optic broadband cable, leaves the copper pair cable to your home or business from the green cabinet in place. Whilst the green cabinet may be squirting “superfast” (24Mbps) broadband to you, if you are more than 1.6Km from the cabinet you are unlikely to see any benefit because copper wires severely attenuate high frequency broadband signals over distances above 1.6Km. (See <http://www.increasebroadbandspeed.co.uk/2013/chart-bt-fttc-vdsl2-speed-against-distance> ) This may not be a problem in towns and cities where most properties served from a cabinet will be within 1.6Km, but in rural areas many customers are at greater distance from these green cabinets. Despite this fact, BT, CDS and BDUK (The government department responsible for the national broadband programme) include all properties connected to a cabinet in there “properties passed” statistics, irrespective of whether they will benefit from being connected to a “fibre enabled cabinet” or not. By definition, these numbers are therefore always inflated and in rural areas they are grossly inflated.

I do not know who Mr Coles was referring to when he said that some individuals are particularly vocal about broadband issues in the area, but he and CDS should heed the words of Abraham Lincoln: *“You can fool some of the people some of the time but you cannot fool all the people all of the time”*.

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, an open letter to the Financial Times from organisations including the Association of Independent Professionals, The Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA), the Institute of Directors (IOD), plus the Chief Executives of Sky, Talk Talk and Vodafone, called on Ofcom to refer BT Openreach, who own the UK telecoms network, to the Competition and Markets Authority with the urgent objective, amongst others, of delivering improved fibre broadband coverage to everyone in the UK. (See <http://www.broadbandtvnews.com/2015/09/21/letter-to-the-financial-times-on-bt-openreach/> )

Poor broadband in Devon & Somerset is now a serious issue for our economy. In 2013 the Department of Culture Media and Sport commissioned a study by Cambridge Econometrics which showed that when fast broadband is introduced to an area, the local economy grows by £20 for every £1 invested (See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-benefits-of-broadband> ). Towns and cities are now reaping the rewards of this investment, but residents and businesses in rural Devon & Somerset are being subject to **Digital Apartheid** because of the failure of BT, CDS the County and District Councils and BDUK/DCMS to get their act together.

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**BROADBAND FOR RURAL DEVON & SOMERSET**

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