

## **Superfast Broadband contracts for rural Devon & Somerset will not be put in place until June 2016.**

At an open public meeting in Bishopswood, Somerset, on Friday night, Somerset County Counsellor and Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS) Board Member, David Hall confirmed that contracts with suppliers for the rural, Phase 2, 95% minimum coverage, Superfast Broadband project will not be in place until June 2016 at the earliest. The meeting was organised by Otterford Parish Council and Chaired by Rebecca Pow, MP for Taunton Deane. Speakers were Cllr David Hall, Paul Coles, BT's SW Region Partnerships Director, Phil Roberts of CDS and Mike Canham, Chairman of Otterford Parish Council.

Contract negotiations between CDS and BT for Phase 2, collapsed in June 2015 with CDS claiming that BT were not offering value for money and Friday night's revelation by Cllr Hall means it will take a full year before the programme is back to the same position as it was in June of this year. An Open Market Review and EU State Aid approval has to be completed before Invitations To Tender (ITT) can be sent to the 15 companies (including BT) that are still believed to be interested in supplying Superfast Broadband to rural Devon & Somerset. Cllr Hall said the ITT would be issued in early 2016.

The government require Phase 2 to provide a minimum of 95% Superfast Broadband across the two counties, but in replying to a question from Steve Horner, a Parish Councillor for Yarcombe, asking why the CDS Board were not intending to stretch Phase 2 coverage beyond 95%, to (say) 98%, by requiring suppliers to bring in private investment alongside the public funding, Cllr Hall seemed to be hearing this suggestion for the first time. This is despite the fact that other Counties (e.g West Oxfordshire) have already successfully put 100% coverage superfast broadband programmes in place, involving private finance and the same companies were offering to do the same in Devon & Somerset before CDS abandoned their first open tender procurement for Phase 2. The previous open tender process (involving 26 companies) was abandoned in January 2015, in favour of giving an exclusive contract to BT, only for those negotiations to collapse in June this year.

It was also confirmed that in order to meet the government's commitment of delivering "basic broadband" at 2Mbps to everyone before the end of 2016, preparations are being made to issue vouchers to those who live in postcodes that will still be left out of the Phase 2 programme, enabling them to get a "free", government funded satellite broadband system. These so called "Vaizey Vouchers" will still require those receiving them to take out an annual contract with the satellite supplier for significantly higher monthly ISP fees compared to fibre or copper wire broadband ISP's, for an inferior, data capped service. The Bishopswood audience made it clear that they don't want satellite; they want fast broadband via their existing telephone lines, which Connecting Devon & Somerset now have close to £100M of public money funding for. When CDS ran a similar "free" satellite hardware scheme in 2013 offering 1,600 free satellite systems, an FOI request confirmed that they only ever installed 192 of the 1,600 "free" systems on offer when the scheme closed in 2014.

In September, the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) published a league table of the best UK counties to run a business in. Devon & Somerset are both in the bottom four, out of 44 counties for broadband provision. The message from the Bishopswood broadband meeting was that broadband provision will not improve soon for rural residents and businesses in Devon & Somerset.

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