

Broadband in the Upper Deverills

In **2008** the Upper Deverills Parish Council established a Broadband Action Group with the brief of trying to improve the poor service that was provided to the three villages. This reflected concerns expressed by local residents who either had very slow speeds or were unable to connect to broadband at all.

During the first year the Group secured some minor improvements to the existing network which improved access and reliability. This meant that speeds in the Upper Deverills slightly increased but settled in a range from around 0.3 to 1.5mbps.

The Group also carried out surveys in **2009** and **2010** which showed that speeds remained relatively low and that less than a third of residents were happy with the service being provided. This information was used to raise concerns with the infrastructure provider (BT Openreach), the local authority (Wiltshire Council) and the local MP. The Broadband Acton Group also investigated options for improving the service through either private companies or a community approach but without being able to make much progress because of the small numbers of premises involved.

The Parish Council also made representations to the Review chaired by Lord Carter in 2009, arguing that, as with other policies, rural areas were seriously disadvantaged by the proposals in "Digital Britain". It was pointed out that the countryside is valued not only by those who live here but also by those who enjoy recreation and other opportunities and that surely it was right that priority should be given to maintaining a reasonable level of basic infrastructure in areas such as this.

In general the submission welcomed the focus on broadband but also said that the proposed Universal Service Commitment for up to 2 Mbps to be effective by 2012 was too slow and suggested that more rapid progress could and should be made towards universal connectivity. It was also felt that 2 Mbps should be the absolute minimum requirement given the expectations about the use of this technology for communications in the future. The final report on Digital Britain can be found here: <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm76/7650/7650.pdf>

In **2010** an unsuccessful application was made to the South West Regional Development Agency for funds from their Next Generation project to provide better broadband.

With the change of Government in 2010 the programme was delayed but both national and local government said that they recognised the importance of providing a modern and faster broadband network. As private companies would not find it profitable to improve the service in areas like ours, some public intervention and funding was recognised as being necessary.

Subsequently Wiltshire Council announced that it was planning to begin a significant programme of investment so that more residents and businesses could have access to superfast broadband and in **2011** they carried out their own survey. The general results showed, not surprisingly, that many Wiltshire residents felt that they needed superfast broadband. It was also considered that this requirement was likely to increase as more services and facilities become available through the web and require greater capacity in the system. Parish and Wiltshire Councillors also recognised that provision of this facility may be an important contributor to sustaining villages for the future. Wiltshire Council were awarded £4.66m in government grant towards proposals to provide superfast broadband in areas that were not commercially viable.

In **2012** Wiltshire Council announced that BT had been selected to provide broadband upgrading throughout the county. Under these proposals the Council was aiming to ensure that a minimum of 91% of all premises would be able to access superfast broadband by 2016. This is defined as a download speed of a minimum of 24 megabits per second (mbps).

By then the remaining 9% of premises would be provided with a minimum speed of 2mbps. So whilst this may be a small improvement and probably provide greater reliability, it will not enable video streaming, easier transmission of large files etc.

Also in 2012 the Broadband Action Group made a submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications which had launched an Inquiry into the provision of superfast broadband. For their report, which highlighted concerns that some communities might lose out, see

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/communications-committee/news/governments-broadband-strategy-risks-leaving-communities-behind>

After further investigations and surveys in early **2013** we received good news and bad news. The good news was that Brixton Deverill would get superfast broadband (though speeds for each premise were not yet certain) through a link back to their exchange at Sutton Veny. The bad news was that Kingston and Monkton Deverill were “more challenging for BT” due to the distances of the cabinets to the exchange at Maiden Bradley.

In the spring of 2013 the Government invited bids for grant from the Rural Community Broadband Fund in order to assist a few communities who would not be getting superfast broadband to get that delivered. As a result the Upper Deverills PC submitted a grant application to the Government’s Rural Community Broadband Fund (RCBF) to provide superfast broadband in Kingston and Monkton Deverill. The application particularly emphasised the importance of upgrading broadband to help sustain these communities and the fact that Kingston and Monkton Deverill would be disadvantaged compared to other local villages.

In the autumn of 2013 it was revealed that our “Expression of Interest” had successfully passed the first hurdle. The Broadband Action Group then had to do much more work to take what was only a preliminary assessment to the next and final stage. Amongst these was the need to produce firm evidence that sufficient numbers of households would sign up to superfast broadband and securing some additional funding as the grant would only cover perhaps 75% of the capital cost.

A survey was undertaken and with a lot of hard work a response from 71% of households was achieved. This showed that at least 60% of households would take up superfast broadband and most importantly that it would also bring significant business and economic benefits to the two villages. Indeed the survey showed that there was significant small business use in the area.

The community also had to raise some private funding to complement the RCBF contribution which was funded by the EU grant. Wessex Water very generously pledged £25,000 towards the full application as a community contribution in relation to the water pipeline and pumping station work then being carried out in Monkton Deverill.

BT had provided a broad brush estimate of costs for the initial RCBF application. But more certainty was required for stage 2.

So in late 2013/early **2014** BT carried out an on the ground survey to update their original estimate. Later that month they advised that as a result of the survey they now believed that they had sufficient existing infrastructure (notably ducting from Maiden Bradley exchange to Kingston Deverill) to make the project cost effective and so Wiltshire Council advised that Kingston and Monkton Deverill would now also be included in the 91% of households being provided with faster broadband under the BT contract. The only caveat was that inclusion was subject to a final survey. But this reservation applied to all communities in the WC/BT contract and if anything we had already had a more detailed study than other villages.

This was obviously excellent news and throughout 2014 and **2015** Wiltshire Council regularly provided information on progress on the planned upgrading of the Sutton Veny and Maiden Bradley exchanges. Both exchanges roll out was due to be completed in the final quarter of 2015. But in early December Wiltshire Council dropped a bombshell advising that Brixton Deverill was not to get the promised upgrading. This was said to be because of the distance that Brixton Deverill was from the new street cabinet installed on the eastern fringe of Longbridge Deverill. As was forcibly pointed out to Wiltshire Council, Brixton Deverill had not moved since the promise made in 2013; and if the infrastructure upgrade was insufficient to provide any noticeably better service to Brixton Deverill why had the UDPC Broadband Action Group been regularly appraised of progress of the upgrading of Sutton Veny exchange and the installation of the new street cabinet?

At the very end of December the new street cabinet installed in Kingston Deverill was commissioned and, after some initial problems, within a month most residents of the two villages were able to access a much faster service ranging from around 16mbps to over 60mbps.

Naturally the Parish Council, the Broadband Action Group and residents were all extremely annoyed and frustrated that the assurances originally given in relation to Brixton Deverill were not being delivered. Throughout **2016** substantial representations were made to Wiltshire Council, in particular the Deputy Leader who had the broadband portfolio and the local Councillor. In addition the support of the local MP was enlisted. The representations from the PC and the BAG were added to by individual complaints from local residents and the point was forcefully made that Brixton Deverill was now surrounded by villages that had faster broadband. Wiltshire Council denied that any firm commitment had been given in relation to Brixton Deverill but did acknowledge in the spring that the village would be considered for the additional funding that was then becoming available. This arose as a result of a cost sharing arrangement with BT from better than anticipated take up on earlier stages of the contract to extend rural broadband. However it was not until December that the welcome news was given that Brixton Deverill would be included in the next phase. Disappointingly surveying for this would not start until summer **2017** and Brixton Deverill was in a group scheduled to be completed by the end of March 2018.

In the event practical problems related to the choice of site for the necessary cabinet and then delays in connecting the electricity supply meant that Brixton Deverill did not go live until the end of September **2018**.

So apart from a few relatively isolated properties the Upper Deverills had a broadband service with speeds of between 20 and 70mbps, a considerable improvement on the typical upload speed of 0.5mbps provided in 2008. Of course all of the properties are served by fibre to a cabinet (FTTC) with a copper wire connection from there. It may be that will be improved at some time in the future with a fibre service to all homes but we shall have to wait and see!