

Full Fibre Future: Broadband Stakeholders and Communities Investing where Government Plans Lacking



*A voice from one of the UK's commercial stakeholders, **Matt Powell**, editor for the consumer broadband comparison site **Broadband Genie**, argues that government plans for broadband investment are not future-proof enough and points to local initiatives and small firms as useful alternatives.*

Throughout the world, telecommunications is undergoing a major period of change as we transition from outdated telephone wires to fibre optic services designed with data in mind.

But in the UK the government's plans for the future of our internet access have been coming under heavy fire for not going far enough.

Last year the **Fiber To The Home Council Europe** denounced the much-vaunted Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) project, saying it had "missed the opportunity to bring the country real broadband."

"Incumbents know that copper is obsolete", said communications director Nadia Babaali, "but they want to hold onto their legacy infrastructure for as long as possible because they are making money from it".

Populated areas of the country are well served by multiple ISPs and increasing access to fibre optic and cable internet, but the UK is increasingly falling behind the rest of the world when it comes to ultra-fast broadband. The **New America Foundation** examined services across the world and ranked the UK in 20th place for speed, far below the US, Hong Kong, Netherlands and many other countries.

The current state of fibre

Right now the UK's fibre broadband connectivity is frustratingly limited. Most fibre internet connections are "Fibre to the Cabinet" (FTTC) which means the high-tech links only go as far as your nearest green box – beyond that it's relying on good old copper wire.

What many are clamouring for is fibre to the home (FTTH), where the fibre goes right into the premises. This avoids the issues associated with an ancient telephone network and the service is future-proof, capable of reaching speeds in excess of 1 gigabit per second. To put that into perspective, the average speed of internet access in the UK is **currently 12 megabits per second**.

FTTH is already available to citizens in many other countries. Places such as Hong Kong and Sweden enjoy 1Gb FTTH connections, often for less than we pay for a much slower link, and this is exactly what Google has been deploying in Kansas City with its Google Fiber service.

However in the UK FTTH has a very limited availability, and that may be leaving us in a weak position as we move further into the 21st Century. At **the Fibre to the Home Conference in February**, CityFibre's Mark Collins commented on the bandwidth barrier we may soon be facing, saying "In five years time it will be at catastrophic levels if we don't do something now. We can't wait until we're all absolutely certain there's the demand for it, because then it'll be too late."

Do we really need full fibre? It's a **common argument when discussing FTTH** to ask what you could do with a 1Gb connection that you can't already achieve with existing FTTC and cable

internet services.

But while it may be true right now that the majority of people will rarely use that to its full capacity and so do not require anything faster, it ignores future developments. We can comfortably stream 1080p high definition video even on an ADSL line, but the next generation of broadcasts might be using the new '4K' standard, which is four times as large. That needs a seriously fat pipe for a stutter-free experience.

And fast internet requirements go beyond consumers watching video or downloading files. Remote and home working is increasingly common, plus a full fibre infrastructure attracts businesses, particularly high-tech start-ups, which create innovations that benefit the economy.

Looking ahead

There's no getting around it, full fibre requires serious investment, however the government's current plan for UK broadband infrastructure is myopic.

The BDUK project has two main aims: a minimum of 2Mb for the whole of the UK, and at least 24Mb for 90% of premises. But this is only a minor improvement on available infrastructure for those living in major population centres, and still leaves rural communities lagging far behind the rest of the country.

In the meantime, private companies and local community projects are taking matters into their own hands. In Cornwall, BT, aided by the European Regional Development Fund, has been laying a fibre optic network since 2010 which is now providing speeds of up to 40Mb to homes which had until recently been relying upon dial-up internet.

In some locations residents are fronting a portion of the costs. Gigaclear is a company dedicated to bringing ultra-fast access to rural homes and in communities that are willing and able to make a commitment to support the service it is now delivering 1Gb links to 400 remote locations. In the north of England the B4RN project got its hands dirty installing its own fibre connections, with financial support coming from shares sold to residents in the areas poorly served by nationwide telecoms providers.

And this isn't just restricted to the countryside. Small local firms have started delivering next generation services to towns and cities for residents tired of waiting for the big players – Bournemouth based Gigler and London's Hyperoptic being just a couple of examples. It's not an ideal situation, but if the government is unwilling to commit to a full fibre future, there are plenty of others ready to offer an alternative.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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