

## Case Study: Bridging the Gap

The realities for communities, to deliver community-funded broadband improvements within budget and time? Is the commitment to communities driving UK Superfast broadband achievable? Or are the barriers of funding, red tape, monopolies, and delivery, just too difficult for most of us to overcome?



Brockweir Bridge, River Wye, Western Border Hewelsfield and Brockweir Parish

### Supporting Delivery of Gigabit Broadband

The Hewelsfield and Brockweir parish is located in the West of the Forest of Dean District in the English county of Gloucestershire.

### Hewelsfield Broadband Group

Hewelsfield Broadband Group was set up by residents to campaign for better broadband within the area. The existing infrastructure situation has resulted in substantial issues with broadband stability and performance; to compound matters with fixed broadband, the mobile network provides inadequate network coverage.

### Community Action

The local residents have worked together to identify potential solutions to resolve the network issues. This included gaining local support, liaising with landowners and finally contacting BT Openreach for a quote to install the infrastructure to deliver decent broadband

(Circa £150k). Fastershire were approach, and have planned to roll out Gigabit Broadband to the area; this was not deemed to be rapid enough for the frustrated local community.

### Local Challenges

#### Geography

The parish is made up of a steep valley spreading up from the Wye at Bigsweir to a broader open rolling farmland where Hewelsfield is located. The local area is rural with two small village centres; there is a low population density and properties tend to be spread apart.

#### Existing Infrastructure

The local infrastructure is inadequate to provide the necessary broadband performance. Key elements are 3 “green cabinets.” Located in the nearby village of St Briavels. 2 of the 3 Cabinets have been upgraded via the Fastershire / Openreach project and therefore are fibre-enabled (FTTC) for the local area.

#### Local Infrastructure Uncertainty

Although 2 of 3 cabinets were fibre-enabled, discussions with local residents during an initial walk around identified that at least one of the “enabled” cabinet’s had not successfully been enabled, resulting in a nearby resident (10m away) not being able to access Fibre Broadband. In addition to this, there was uncertainty whether the Openreach backhaul fibre connection from St Briavels to Chepstow had been installed or activated.



Fibre Enabled Fastershire / Openreach Cabinet

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## Finding a Solution

The Forest Economic Partnership contacted a local wireless broadband provider with local experience of delivering local network solutions for small communities.

## Proposal

The proposal was to link into the St Briavels to Chepstow Fibre Backhaul and then propagate a mix of wireless and wired connections across the area.

## Outcomes

An initial walk-around was carried out to understand the feasibility of the project. To complete the feasibility study and outline costings, the provider needed to know:

- 1) Whether the Openreach Backhaul through the area was installed
- 2) Whether the Backhaul could support the proposed solution

## Barriers to Rural Broadband

Following the attempt to deliver broadband to the Hewelsfield and Bigsweir area several barriers have been identified to the delivery of rural broadband;

## Cost of Solutions

- BT quotes to communities for the provision of services are excessively expensive compared to other providers.
- All solutions would cost more than available Gigabit Voucher scheme values.

## Network Information

- Openreach does not have accurate information on rural infrastructure provisioning.
- Openreach are challenging to work with both to get information and the time it takes.

## Fair and Open Markets

- Criticism has been levelled at BT Openreach, that following installation quotes can vary substantially between initial quotes and later revisions following third party feasibility planning and costing activity.

## Funding Solutions

- Schemes such as Gigabit Vouchers are not adequate to fund the cost of installation
- Alternative programmes are needed (e.g. mg broadband scheme, Fastershire) to fund effective solutions.

## Sustainable Solutions

- Connections have to be commercially viable; this includes maintenance and upgrades of the infrastructure into the future. A few houses do not provide enough revenue to maintain long rural connections.

## Summary

In summary, following FEPs experience, the rollout of superfast (or even fast) broadband takes too long, is frequently difficult for smaller providers to support, and quoted costs from major providers seem both excessive and highly variable. It demonstrates the importance of overarching organisations such as Fastershire, but also shines a light on the challenges, lack of real enthusiasm for the broadband infrastructure market to be open and support rapid deployment of solutions.

For more information about Super Fast Broadband delivery in the Forest of Dean visit <https://www.fastershire.com/>