

Blackdown Hills Parish Network

Cadbury House, Fore Street, Culmstock,

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Date: April 29, 2020

This is an open letter to Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Oliver Dowden MP and Under Secretary of State for Digital Infrastructure, Matt Warman MP, copied to Devon & Somerset MPs

Dear Secretary of State,

Why are South West rural communities locked down without adequate internet provision?

Many rural residents in the UK still have a broadband service delivered from old BT telephone exchanges over copper wire. Today in Devon & Somerset 83% of the rural population do not have a satisfactory broadband service. Some of these residents live in the Blackdown Hills AONB, including the 39 parishes served by the Blackdown Hills Parish Network (BHPN)*

In 2012 Building Digital UK (BDUK) allocated £27m of public money to the two counties expressly to deliver Phase 2 superfast rural broadband through Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS) run by the two County Councils. It was the first and the largest such programme set up in England and it will be the last to successfully complete all Phase 2 contracts, when other county council run programmes are already on their Phase 4 rollout.

You will be aware that on February 26, representatives of the BHPN met with DCMS Under Secretary of State, Matt Warman MP and Justin Leese, CEO of BDUK, to discuss CDS's three successive failures to secure workable contracts. Five of the six CDS Phase 2 contracts awarded to Gigaclear in CDS's third attempt to deliver Phase 2 were cancelled by CDS last year with BDUK saying the supplier could only guarantee 70% adherence to schedule for an extended term. Laying fibre is a major civil engineering project and the average UK adherence to schedule for civil engineering projects is only 66%. As a result, CDS are running their fourth procurement attempt, which means some rural residents will now have to wait until 2025 before better broadband is available to them, thirteen years since public money was first allocated. The Minister proposed that doubling BDUK representation on the CDS board, from one to two representatives, would prevent a fourth procurement failure.

These problems have been brought into even sharper focus as a result of the current pandemic. Those activities that are facilitated by high speed broadband such as working from home, completing interactive education assignments, accessing online shopping, banking, entertainment and online GP consultations become essential needs for the entire population and rural communities in particular. The need for regular interactive video and voice contact with relatives, friends and colleagues becomes essential to combat rural isolation. Every single one of these activities is rendered tremendously difficult with single digit broadband speeds of a few Mbps.

Local democracy is carrying on as normal, thanks to local authorities being allowed to conduct their publicly accessible council meetings using videoconference platforms. However this can only be exploited where individual Parish Councillors have access to fast broadband. Many rural Devon & Somerset parishes have such poor connectivity that some Blackdown Hills Parish Councils are conducting Parish Council business via email and telephone only. This is not good for local democracy or faith in local government.

These radical changes have all come about since the BHPN delegation met the Under Secretary of State and serve to underline the importance of fast digital communications in both urban and rural areas. Residents of rural Devon & Somerset have been struck a double blow – a further delay of up to five years for fast broadband and the immediate problem of poor internet connectivity to communicate efficiently during the current pandemic. Fast broadband in rural areas was an afterthought in BDUK's superfast broadband programme and that has been made worse by CDS's failure to spend the public funds allocated to them in 2012.

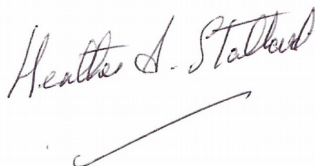
Putting the UK back on track as a thriving economy will be the most important goal for the UK Government once this pandemic has passed. We will be in a changed world, where there will be a noticeable move from “physical travel” to more “online travel”. Businesses and employers will make more use of home-working and online videoconferencing, schools and colleges will make more use of distance learning, consumers will spend more disposable income online. This all carries the added environmental benefit of reducing pollution and energy consumption, building stronger and more sustainable communities and improving the UK’s resilience to deal with future challenges but recovery in 83% of rural Devon and Somerset will be much slower as a direct result of their substandard broadband service.

Surely the ‘outside the box’ thinking which will bring Coronavirus under control must now be brought to bear on the failing rural broadband programme in Devon & Somerset? The Under Secretary of State acknowledged the problem in February. Could he not take direct control of CDS, remove the county council control and get the job done?

CDS often point out that theirs is the biggest broadband programme in England having more public funding than any other but bigger here definitely does not mean better since it will now be the slowest to complete its Phase 2 programme and is also likely to prove the least cost effective. CDS’s failure to secure an exclusive Phase 2 deal with BT in 2015, necessitated BDUK obtaining an extension of EU State Aid Approval, resulting in a year’s delay to Phase 2 roll out. CDS has offered numerous stop gap voucher schemes in lieu of completing Phase 2. The most recent, the Community Fibre “Partnership” from BT, requires communities to pay part of the cost that CDS has had £27m to deliver since 2012 without any additional cost to businesses or consumers. Last month the Universal Service Obligation scheme managed by OFCOM and BT became available, delivering a minimum guaranteed service of only 10Mbps, often using BT’s mobile phone network, EE.

Desperate rural Devon & Somerset residents are opting for these solutions, not knowing if or when they will ever get a 21st century fibre solution. This unacceptable situation can only be remedied by root and branch reform of CDS, or its removal. Otherwise the economy of rural Devon & Somerset will be trapped in an unsustainable slow lane. The allocated monies must be spent effectively and soon. Take this failed project out of the hands of the two county councils, run it centrally and deliver to rural Devon & Somerset taxpayers the 21st century digital infrastructure they were promised 8 years ago. It is the responsibility of government, economically, socially and politically to lead the recovery of the UK in a post-virus world with decisive, innovative and politically courageous solutions.

Sincerely,



Heather Stallard MBE, Chair, The Blackdown Hills Parish Network (BHPN)

Catherine Bass, Coordinator, The Blackdown Hills Parish Network

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BHPN Steering Group Members:

Graham Long, Bob Nelson, Alex Stevens, Ken Pearson, Michael Canham, Roger Habgood, Alison Weekes, Daniel Lazar.

**The Blackdown Hills Parish Network represents the interests of the 39 parishes in the Blackdown Hills AONB in Devon & Somerset south of the M5, and with the A303/A30 running through it. The BHPN exists to pursue issues of common concern to all the parish councils in the AONB and is run by elected representatives from those parish councils.*