

Report on broadband meeting on Thursday 30th January at Watlington Town

Background

Over the course of the last five years, Connect8 has been active in striving to achieve the very best broadband service in the local South Oxfordshire area and with considerable success. During this time, a considerable number of contacts have been established to ensure that that new technology availability and funding opportunities would not be missed. In this respect, close contact has been established on behalf the Watlington Parish Council with the Oxfordshire County Council Better Broadband team, who have recently supported a Survey to assess interest in the specific opportunity for the deployment of ultrafast broadband throughout the town and even further afield.

The Opportunity

The survey sample of 135 responses revealed that roughly 2/3 of premises expressed a willingness to pay more per month for a better and faster service and so the Parish Council arranged a meeting where stakeholders were able to present aspects of relevant information. The meeting was poorly attended, but the panel was able to clearly identify the latest position, answer questions and the potential for Watlington. The panel comprised:

Mark Hopping – Programme Manager for OCC Better Broadband
Michelle Maidment – Customer Field Manager for Openreach (BT)
Andrew Roberts, Andrew Brain and Phillipa Blackburn from Airband UK

The existing network of ducts and overhead lines in Watlington are owned and maintained by BT and the town has five “green cabinets” delivering superfast broadband to customers through a wide range of Internet Service Providers including BT Retail, who represent the vast majority of those who responded to the survey

The UK Government has committed to the deployment of fibre optic technology through FTTP (Fibre to the Premises) as the use of copper wire to premises is unable to deliver the speeds and consistency of service that the majority of people require now and in a future when copper will almost certainly be “switched off”. Furthermore, intense lobbying has led to Government agreement that rural broadband connectivity is vital for counties such as Oxfordshire.

The OCC Better Broadband team have been awarded a £6M+ scheme called BIRO – Business Internet for Rural Oxfordshire - and have split deployment in the County to Airband UK in the south, and BT in the north. As a result, Airband are committed to connecting a number of rural businesses through a new fibre backbone, which is going to be routed past Watlington, and effectively around it. The cost of this installation is part of BIRO.

It makes sense to offer business and residential customers ultrafast connectivity to this fibre and facilitate the cost through the use of a Government funded voucher scheme whereby business users can secure up to £3500 and residential customers £1500. Through an aggregation of these vouchers, fibre optic FTTP can be established to cover infrastructure needs.

The service and voucher award requires a few criteria to be met and these are not onerous but necessary to ensure that the benefits go to those who qualify.

Looking at the bigger picture, we have a Government funded voucher scheme operating at the same time as BIRO and this combination together with a 10-15% increase in population increase in Watlington Parish is attractive to providers.

Airband are building the fibre network and are targeting May/June as the time this will be happening and will be working closely with Openreach regarding wholesale provision and the technical implementation.

It was stated at the meeting that a figure of just 50 would be the required figure for Airband to “kick off” and as such they have already created a web site with specific information:

<https://www.airband.co.uk/demandled/watlington/>

It is clearly understood that some people will want to run existing contracts down or even secure release (Airband may be able to help with that) – others will want to negotiate with their existing ISP to establish whether they can remain with them but connect with ultrafast. The whole process will take some time to unfold.

In the meantime Gigaclear have indicated that they cannot look any further than Quarter 3 in respect of any plans they might have had in mind for Watlington

Airband have the BIRO contract and that presents a huge advantage – they have to handle all the fibre route administration relating to laying fibre and minimising disruption and inconvenience. Airband are offering some very attractive “early bird” packages as you can see from the flier

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on behalf of Watlington Parish Council