

Written evidence submitted by SJ Horner

Introduction.

I set out in this submission to the Public Accounts Committee, a synopsis of my efforts to obtain a broadband signal here in East Devon. Although I live in a rural area my farmhouse overlooks the A 303, which is one kilometre distant and the A 30 three kilometres distant, my premises cannot in any sense of the word be regarded as being remote.

I run my own financial services company and keep all the records for my small farm, both businesses require a full fibre high speed broadband connection to operate efficiently. My nearest BT telephone exchange is Buckland St Mary to which my premises are connected by a copper cable which is about 6 kilometres in length which produces an intermittent broadband speed of about 2 mbps when the telephone wire is functional.

Experience

During the past decade the need for a fast broadband signal has become ever more necessary for both my own businesses and family recreation. The broadband roll-out programme in this area has been managed by Connecting Devon and Somerset (CD&S) and since 2016 I have been working to persuade CD&S to bring high speed broadband into this area of the county; this has involved meetings at the County Halls in Exeter and Taunton with representatives of CD&S and County Councillors.

In 2018 CD&S under Phase 2 of the super-fast broadband programme awarded a contract to Gigaclear Ltd to construct a broadband infrastructure covering the northern part of Yarcombe. Under this contract my premises were scheduled to be connected; my hopes of broadband FTTP connection were dashed when CD&S cancelled the contract. I understand since that date CD&S have awarded contracts in this area to a company called Airband Community Network Ltd (Airband); contract Lot E covers Yarcombe, and contract Lot C will cover the parish of Otterford which lies in Somerset.

Assistance from Neil Parish MP

Upon the cancellation of the Gigaclear contract I appealed to my member of parliament Neil Parish for his assistance, in turn he lobbied BT who through their local director made available technical assistance and an aerial which enabled me to develop a connection to the local EE mobile phone network

which provides a reasonable signal speed which is just about usable for my business.

Present Position

Over the past six months I have been in close communication with both Airband and CD&S and have been informed that the Airband contract awarded to cover this area of Yarcombe and its neighbouring parish of Otterford will be rolled out as follows

Yarcombe N. Lot E Cluster 9. Survey Spring 2023. Completion Autumn 2023

Otterford Lot C Cluster 14 Survey Spring 2022 Completion Autumn 2022.

I have checked the roll out programme per premises against the Airband Post Code Checker, I conclude my premises are situated between the two contracted areas and it is obvious I will not be covered by a connection to either cluster which has been confirmed to me by e-mail by a representative of Airband.

Anomaly contained in Invitation to Tender

It is reasonable to assume that if my property was to have been connected under the cancelled Gigaclear contract then it should therefore be included in parts of the newly awarded Airband contract. After investigation I believe that this anomaly arises because of a mistake within the methodology of the contract award procedure. The Invitation to Tender (ITT) provides as a basis a fixed amount “*Available Funding*” and a list of potential premises (the White List) against which the bidder is required to quote a sum per connection and provide a list of the premises to be connected. In fact, there is no obligation for the bidder to include all the premise as set out in the White List. My contention is that if the amount of Available Funding per contract as computed by CD&S was not calculated correctly and funds were insufficient, then as a result certain properties, probably those more distant from the main network, would be excluded from the contract award. Alternatively, even if the amount of Available Funding is sufficient, then the bidder has the right to exclude premises on the White List that are considered to be commercially unviable.

Economic costs of the delayed CD&S roll out

Undoubtedly the delay in providing a high-speed broadband network in East Devon will have worked against any increases in productivity not only for my business but also others in the area.

The eight-year extended period of the implementation of the roll out must have increased the total overhead costs incurred by the two counties, which would

include payroll and salaries of consultants and must by now amount to a considerable sum.

Further examination of the facts

The Public Accounts Committee may well wish to examine the evidence upon which my hypothesis which identifies a flaw in the Tender, if this proves to be correct it may well confirm the Committee's previous concerns that digital inequality does persist in rural areas particularly in Devon and Somerset.

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