

Clubbing together for faster broadband

An alternative solution devised by a small Hampshire village

The people of Rotherwick, a village in the north of Hampshire, have recently proved just how much a small community can do with a collective effort.

By pooling their resources, they have pushed their broadband speed up from a meagre 1Mb/s to more than 30Mb/s. Some residents are even enjoying twice that speed!

Here's how they did it ...

Identifying the need

John Bennett, a Rotherwick resident who is self-employed and often works from home, was struggling to cope with broadband speeds of less than 2Mb/s. He also knew his neighbours were struggling in a similar way.

"It affected everyone in different ways," says John. "Home working was virtually impossible. People couldn't watch iPlayer. Everything online moved so slowly."

In Rotherwick's two small business parks, the local broadband speed was proving a big obstacle. John says, "They had a lot of empty units. Slow broadband was deterring businesses from coming. They were keen to do something about it."

Researching the options

At the end of 2011 Hampshire County Council ran a campaign inviting people to register their interest in investment in faster broadband, and also promoted some grant funding for communities whose speeds were unlikely to be improved - so John was quick to contact the Council and check out the options.

Sadly, it transpired that Rotherwick was in the 10% of Hampshire communities who

may not be benefitting from improved broadband speeds through the Council-funded programme.

However, John learned that Rotherwick might be eligible for a grant to help residents commission an improved line themselves. He enlisted the help of his local Parish Council, and started to research the costs and practicalities of arranging the installation of better broadband directly with the supplier.

Early discussions with BT

John spoke to BT to find out how realistic such an installation might be.

He says, "BT had recently installed an optical fibre to another village whose community had gathered the money between them. So they knew it could be done. They told me it would cost just under £27,000 to do the work. If we waited for a grant from the Council, that would cover half the money, but it might take quite some time. If we raised the whole amount ourselves in the village, the work could be done in nine months."

Galvanising support

With the options now clearly laid out, it was time for the people of Rotherwick



to decide just how much they wanted broadband. Would people be prepared to contribute to the cost of the installation?

John called a meeting in the village hall, and put up posters to encourage people to come. He also emailed everyone he knew in the village.

"I was quite surprised by the response," John says. "More than 50 people turned up – and as there are not many more than 150 houses in the village that would benefit from the scheme, that's quite a big group. A lot of people were very keen to do something about the broadband."

A clear call to action

As a group, the villagers needed to put up a lot of money. But John asked people to give the amount that they felt broadband was worth to them.

He set a two-week deadline for pledges of money, to ensure that people would be motivated to come to a decision rather than putting the question off.

"I told them the total amounts we would need, with and without waiting for a grant. I estimated how many households would show an interest. I let people work out what the average contribution needed to be, and I asked people to give whatever they felt it was worth to them. I didn't want people to be put off by pressure to give more than they could spare. I also promised I would never reveal the amounts people gave."

Collecting the money

Within two weeks, the villagers had pledged 90% of the amount needed to install the new line. Suddenly, Rotherwick was within reach of faster broadband – and without waiting for a grant. The villagers would have their new line within nine months.

Once the entire sum was raised Bob Humble, another resident in the village with good business knowledge, set up a limited company. This was necessary to enable BT to do business with Rotherwick as a group. It proved fairly simple.

Collecting the money was next. Only half of the money had to be in Rotherwick's company account before the contract was signed, but John asked people to try to give all that they had pledged in one go. "I knew this would be easier to administer than asking people for part of the money now and part later," John recalls.

Teething problems

The contract was successfully signed in August 2012.

The installation itself was the final challenge. Problems with the equipment carried by the BT engineers caused a number of inconvenient delays, and confusion over a planning application also proved problematic. However, John and others worked hard communicating with their BT contacts to resolve things, and the work was completed by the agreed deadline in March 2013.

Success

After years of enduring speeds less than 2Mb/s, John is now enjoying an average speed of 38Mb/s and some others in his village are reporting speeds of twice that. The improvement has made a massive difference to the community. Home-working, online shopping, on-demand films and skypeing are now part of daily life.

John's tips for starting a community broadband project

"Communicating with everyone regularly is really important," says John. "Holding a public meeting worked really well. I also did a lot of emailing and knocking on doors."

John's other tips include:

- Engage with the supplier early and research what you are trying to do. Knowing the costs and practicalities is important.
- Engage with your County Council BDUK Programme Team
- Seek help from your Parish Council. Parish Councillors in Rotherwick were extremely helpful and supportive.
- Keep the amounts people give confidential. Pressure to give the same as others could be really off-putting.
- Set a deadline for pledges of money, so that people have to make a decision.
- Don't expect the installation to be simple; keep talking to the supplier and work through the problems with them.

If you would like further advice on starting a community broadband project, please email broadband@hants.gov.uk or call 0845 603 5638.