

High Speed Broadband – Walberswick

Positioning Paper

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This paper is the writers own views derived from personal experience and limited knowledge/research.

It is not meant to be a definitive guide and should not be regarded as a technical assessment.

It is meant to stimulate interest in the issue and provide a basis for wider engagement within the Village leading to the proposing of solutions for the community to consider.

Background

- > My own difficulty in obtaining consistent and reliable broadband speed for my relatively modest requirement kicked off this subject.

- > From limited “word of mouth” research it appears that a number of other users in the village have also encountered unworkable speeds and interrupted service.

- > BT wholesale appeared unable to provide resilient fixes and acknowledged that there are limitations in the current “copper wire” networks and excessive demand on the capacity of Southwold exchange.

- > Future demand for bandwidth will increase rapidly as technology and commercial processes drive wider adoption of data hungry online activities.

- > Future developments in communication and media suggest households will require on demand high speed internet access.

- > Lack of such access is likely to inhibit economic development and ultimately depress property values relative to areas that have good easy access.

- > Local business development and professional activities of residents and visitors may be restricted undermining sustainability of the village.

- > There are considerable social and environmental gains to be derived from high speed internet access which can often be overlooked particularly when evaluations are made from a purely commercial perspective.

- > Current trends suggest that access to high speeds via portable devices will be expected by residents and visitors which suggests that solutions should not be restricted to solely fixed point access.

- > UK Government has made access a major priority for economic prosperity and is seemingly supportive to uniform availability particularly recognising the issues faced by rural areas. They want to avoid a digital divide. See “Britain’s Superfast Broadband Future” Dept for Business Innovation and Skills published Dec 2010. www.bis.gov.uk .

> In support of the above £530m of public funds to “seed” development has been earmarked over the lifetime of this parliament. The adequacy of funding and whether this is political rhetoric remains to be seen.

Current Assessment

- > Walberswick is not network cabled and it is unlikely to be financially attractive enough for mainstream commercial suppliers to do so.

- > Lack of an existing cable network significantly reduces options and increases cost.

- > After much confusing dialogue with many BT officials it is clear that nothing is planned by them to address this in the near future (12 months).

- > BT suggest that fibre optic cable is likely to be installed to the village cabinet in 2015. In the absence of new network cabling or another solution this will from that point use the existing BT infrastructure to distribute to households. This is likely to significantly degrade the speed when ultimately received in the home. It will provide no access for mobile devices outside of the home.

- > A robust solution could be the purchase of a leased line to an optimal point in the village which can then be distributed to users by wireless networking.

- > A range of more esoteric solutions exist or are in development many by rural communities. These need to be considered for Walberswick too.

- > Feasibility of any scheme will depend upon demand which is in turn dependant on communication, understanding and enrolment of the community. It is suggested that in places with demographics similar to Walberswick people are unlikely to be proactive at seeking high speed but can once engaged become very passionate adopters. The demand from businesses and non residents may currently be greater than that of residents and needs to be recognised.

Action Taken to Date

- > An organisation has been approached for general advice.

- > A “market price” indication of the cost of a 100 meg capacity up and down leased line is £15k p.a. This takes no account of likely geographic or engineering issues for Walberswick which may or may not impact cost.

- > This can be distributed to individual locations at a capital cost of circa £150 per location. It could enable Wi-Fi hot spots to be created in the village for mobile access.

- > To provide coverage initial desk research suggest that a wireless network needs to cover 750,000sq meters and have a distribution point on a high point in Manor Close/ Leveretts Lane.

- > BT have been asked to quote for a leased line into such location. This will determine likely cost but more importantly identify any engineering/location difficulties which could become a “show stopper”. It is believed the current BT cable is routed under the river.

- > No approach has been made to alternative network providers e.g. Virgin media.

- > 100 meg is insufficient to provide universal access and may not support more than 30 serious users.

Possible Structures

Assuming solutions exist that meet demand versus price elasticity a number of options could be available to the community such as:-

1. Community bears the cost collectively in some way and makes access “free for all”.
2. Community sets up “not for profit” company charging subscribers accordingly. It could generate additional income by charging mobile users to access via Wi-Fi hot spots.
3. An individual or group of individuals “go it alone” as a commercial enterprise.

Next Steps

Given the need for additional research and the likely wide range of options the writer suggests that a small team should be formed to continue the project under the sponsorship of the PC at no cost to the community.

The following is an outline of likely work streams some of which should run concurrently.

- Complete current feasibility.
- Research and qualify or reject alternative solutions.
- Embark on a community education programme and demand assessment to include business and non full time residents.
- Link with other interested parties as there are a number of initiatives on this topic locally.
- Recommend solutions and devise a process to achieve consensus.
- Oversee implementation of solution if a viable project is agreed.

Timelines

An aggressive but achievable time line would be:-

- Propose fully costed solutions end Q3 2011.
- Solution installed and operational end Q1 2012.

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