

Subject: [New post] Just one broadband village left to resist BT pressure
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New post on Br0kenTeleph0n3



Just one broadband village left to resist BT pressure by Br0kenTeleph0n3

If BT is the Roman empire, then Tove Valley is looking like a small Gaulish village filled with indomitable villagers.

The red line indicates where TVB plans coverage.

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Tove Valley may soon be the only one of the six proposed rural broadband projects invited to talks with culture secretary Maria Miller to get funding, and BT is so determined to get it to throw in its lot with the monopolist telco that a BT manager has at best misrepresented an earlier rural project.

The Abthorpe Broadband Association (ABbA), which has run a wireless broadband service in the Tove Valley area in Northamptonshire for 10 years. Following discussions with the local parish council, it has asked DEFRA/BDUK for money from the £20m Rural Community Broadband Fund (RCBF) to fund a superfast broadband project, Tove Valley Superfast Broadband (TVB) . It has also asked the county council to cut out its postcodes from the proposed BT coverage footprint.

The service, which went live in May, is based on a fibre optic feed into the Lois Weedon school. This is then transmitted via Wi-Fi to nearby villages and properties. TVB is charging £120 a year for up to 30Mbps, plus £175 for sign-on and equipment.

Following a meeting between Giles Ellerton, business development director NGA for BT Group, and TVB chairman Eric Malcomson, Ellerton wrote to Malcomson on 14 June 2013 to confirm the risks of going it alone. BrokenTelephone has seen the letter, which is marked "Strictly commercial and in confidence".

Ellerton wrote, "If Tove Valley Broadband is not able to secure an ISP partner to offer value added services to end users, there is a real risk of a digital divide occurring again among the different communities in which neighbouring communities will have access to a range of services offered by a choice of ISPs...BT Retail(which manages BT Sport) has not to date used networks similar to Tove Valley Broadband network because of the costs and complications as discussed... Experience has shown that where independent small fibre networks have been deployed, large national ISP's (sic) have failed to engage or use the network for the reasons already discussed."

(This is the same issued highlighted by New_Londoner, believed to the Twitter 'handle' of

Openreach CEO Liv Garfield, in relation to fibre altnet Gigaclear in an ISPreview interview in which it claimed to have had more than 400 enquiries.)

Ellerton went on to say that if Northamptonshire agrees to cut the Tove Valley postcodes out of the BDUK intervention area (the area which BT is contracted to supply) the change would be "irreversible". If the project was later found to be "not compliant" with state aid funding rules, ABbA would be responsible for repaying DEFRA in full.

"In the case of an application by the Rothbury community in Northumberland for the RCBF scheme, it was felt by DEFRA that the financial risk of failure by the operator (Grey Sky (sic) Consulting) was too great and the funding conditions required that the project then had to be novated (a new contract substituted for the old one) into the Local Authority BDUK project."

GreySky's CEO James Saunby concurs with the risks BT identifies, but provide a different picture as to what happened.

"Although GreySky acted as the 'accountable body' throughout the development of the project, we are a consultancy company. With the addition of the RCBF funding, the project took on a scale that would never have been appropriate for GreySky to take any financial risk associated with its delivery," he says.

"GreySky is a consultancy, not a service provider or network operator. To achieve the preferred solution, the council needed to take responsibility for the project. Because of the way the project had developed, this presented some challenges to the council. This solution (novation) was encouraged by Defra as a means of most effectively managing the risks of the project. However, I am not aware of any statement from Defra that 'the funding conditions required it.'

"It is also not clear to me that this would apply to other projects where they had been developed by communities with the intention from the outset of maintaining an ongoing involvement with the project."

BT did not respond to requests to explain its use of the language used in Ellerton's letter to ABbA.

Ellerton wrote that BT's solution for Tove Valley is to keep all but "the final 10%" of homes inside the BDUK coverage area, and to use RCBF money "to go as far as possible" into the remainder.

"The community can (then) use a Build and Benefit model to provide payment in kind through items such as self-dig or access to way-leaves. You might also be able to contribute through your own locally branded Demand Stimulation programme to achieve 60%+ take up through a pre-registration exercise. A final option could be the community provides private funds to procure a fibre cabinet(s) to service the Tove Valley Broadband project area, along the same lines as Islip in Oxfordshire."

Malcomson referred BrokenTelephone to a flyer prepared for the 2013 TalkTalk Digital Heroes awards in which he said the project had already connected more than half the 400 potential customers in its area at speeds above 30Mbps. "Supplying 200 households and

businesses reflects the levels of take up we predicted in our business plan. It goes to show the demand there is for superfast broadband."

Nearby villages have asked to join the Tove Valley scheme. "Bradden and Helmdon would nearly double the potential size of our market, but the community model we already have in place will work on a larger scale. It will also give us the opportunity to significantly increase our bandwidth and supply yet faster broadband. The future is very exciting."

Br0kenTeleph0n3 | 2013/11/07 at 06:35 | Tags: [BDUK](#), [broadband](#), [BT](#), [Digital Britain](#), [Fibre](#), [wireless broadband](#) | Categories: [Broadband](#), [Internet](#), [News](#) | URL: <http://wp.me/p1ysPw-z6>

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