

Better broadband for Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent

Autumn 2011



Photo: Staffordshire County Councillor Mark Winnington discusses broadband issues with residents of Calf Heath at a better broadband roadshow event.

Over the next few years, broadband services across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent will be improved.

The Government's Broadband Delivery UK programme has allocated £7.44m to improve services in the area. A local project led by Staffordshire County Council, City of Stoke-on-Trent Council, and the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership is working to raise the extra funds needed to deliver faster, more reliable broadband.

Staffordshire County Councillor Mark Winnington, Cabinet Member for Environment and Assets, said: *"We know that broadband really matters to people. Businesses of all sizes need a broadband service they can rely on. Good internet connections also open up a host of opportunities to residents. We share the Government's commitment to improving the broadband network, and this funding is most welcome. It will help us to work with broadband*

companies to improve the services provided to residents and businesses throughout Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent."

The Government programme requires broadband providers to ensure that all premises can access standard broadband services no later than 2015, and to roll out superfast broadband to most premises.

To meet these objectives, the programme will invest in areas which broadband companies have seen as not commercially viable, in particular, eliminating not-spots and slow-spots which most affect rural areas.

Local Enterprise Partnership Board Member, Sue Prince OBE, said: *"Broadband is vital to our economy. Existing broadband services to our rural communities are often unreliable and frequently just too slow. The £7.44m funding will help us to enable the service providers to make essential improvements, particularly in rural areas which are least well served."*

Over the summer, the local project launched a survey for all residents and businesses, consulted with Parish Councils and business organisations, and visited broadband not-spots and slow-spots around the area to hear people's experiences first-hand.

Residents and businesses across the area are urged to use Staffordshire County Council's broadband survey to help prove where problems exist, and show the level of demand for better broadband.

Have your say

If you live in Staffordshire or Stoke-on-Trent, you can help the project by completing an online survey. You can measure your broadband speed when completing the survey. Residents and businesses are encouraged to take part. Please visit:

www.staffordshire.gov.uk/broadbandconsultation

Anyone who can't complete the survey online can request a paper copy from Staffordshire County Council by calling:
0300 111 8000

If you have any specific comments about your broadband service, please get in touch with the project team at:
sfbroadband@staffordshire.gov.uk

Gathering the evidence from you ...

In June and July 2011, the project team held nine roadshow events at known broadband not-spots and major slow-spots. Around 400 people took part in the roadshows (representing over 700 internet users).

The events were organised in partnership with Staffordshire Rural Hub, which represents rural businesses, with additional support from the Community Council of Staffordshire, which represents rural communities and has a "watching brief" for Government with regard to broadband issues.

The roadshows presented people with an opportunity to find out about broadband, why it is important, and why the service in their area might be slow. Participants completed some simple consultation exercises and were asked to complete the broadband survey and speed-test when they got home.

Over the summer, over 1,500 people have completed the broadband survey.

The results of the speed-test have been particularly important in proving where problems exist.

Generally speaking, the slow-spots around the area are locations which are some distance from the nearest telephone exchange. Most of the area - and particularly rural locations - receive broadband across copper telephone wires. The telephone network

was designed for people to be able to speak to each other, not for transmitting information between computers. If you receive internet services across a copper telephone line, then the further your premises are located from your telephone exchange, the slower the line speed will be.

There are a few different ways to improve the broadband network, and the project team is working with commercial companies to achieve the best solution.

The broadband survey also highlighted some of the reasons why residents and businesses need a better broadband service.

For many people, better broadband is needed so that more than one person can be online at the same time.

Almost half of respondents are unable to watch online TV using their current broadband connection.

For businesses, more than half of respondents would like to be able to use video communications (such as video-conferencing) but can't do so because the connection is inadequate.

The project team has assembled statistical evidence like these examples, and many anecdotes gathered at the roadshow events, in order to provide a compelling case to BDUK and broadband wholesale network operators to improve local services.

Who's who?

Several organisations are working together to deliver better broadband for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

The Government set out its strategy for improving broadband in a white paper called *Britain's Superfast Broadband Future*. The Government wants everybody in the UK to be able to access better broadband services no later than 2015.

To help achieve the Government's aims, a team within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was established, called Broadband Delivery UK (usually abbreviated to BDUK). BDUK has allocated funds to local projects around the country, including £7.44m to our area.

The project team in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent includes people from Staffordshire County Council, City of Stoke-on-Trent Council, and the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership.

The project team is looking for wholesale network operators - the companies that run the broadband infrastructure - to propose how they can deliver better broadband services in the best way to people right across our area.

... To help providers improve broadband services



Photo: Participants at a better broadband roadshow event in Warslow highlight problems with the service where they live.

The Government's first objective is to eliminate broadband not-spots and slow-spots. It wants everybody across the whole of the UK to be able to access broadband with a minimum speed of 2mbps by 2015. A service of such a speed should enable someone to watch catch-up TV services such as BBC iPlayer over their internet connection.

In Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, we believe that much faster broadband speeds are imperative. The Government's second objective is to accelerate the roll-out of "superfast" broadband, with download speeds of at least 24mbps available to at least 90 percent of premises by 2015.

The local project team is working to ensure that broadband providers get started on improving services as quickly as possible - and it is likely that infrastructure works could start as soon as autumn 2012.

But the physical infrastructure is just one side of the coin. The broadband network

operators and internet service providers need to be convinced that there are significant numbers of customers who will take up their improved broadband services. To date, the best services have been located where companies can justify investing. Even with funding allocated from BDUK, broadband companies will need to invest huge sums to improve their services.

According to Ofcom, the organisation which regulates the telecommunications industry, there is a large untapped market in our area. Ofcom data suggests that broadband services are taken up at 66 percent (two thirds) of premises in Staffordshire, and 58 percent in Stoke-on-Trent.

We believe there is a very high demand for better broadband across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, but we need residents and businesses to provide us with the evidence so that we can convince commercial companies to invest in our area. Please use our survey to have your say.

What happens next?

The project team has submitted its draft strategy for improving local broadband services to BDUK.

During the autumn, the team will consult with district, borough and parish councils, community groups and business organisations.

BDUK is currently working with wholesale network operators to identify a number of companies that have suitable technical options for improving broadband services. BDUK is also negotiating with the European Commission to allow public funds to be spent with private-sector wholesale network operating companies.

Once BDUK has completed its initial selection process and the EC has approved its State Aid application, the local project team for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent will formally tender for companies to improve broadband services, in accordance with its local strategy. BDUK expects that it will have completed its tasks by April-May 2012.

The local project team will require broadband providers to improve services as swiftly as possible. We can't yet say when work will start for particular areas. The Government wants all areas to have better broadband by 2015 at the latest.

Frequently asked questions

Who is responsible for broadband in Staffordshire?

Wholesale network operators provide the infrastructure such as fibre-optic cables and copper telephone lines. Internet service providers offer broadband services to consumers. The overall service is regulated by Ofcom.

Who should I contact if I have a problem with my broadband service?

Contact the company that provides your broadband service - you will have a contract with an internet service provider, and they are responsible for resolving problems with the service.

What if my service provider says it's not their problem?

If you can't get the service you're paying for, check the terms of your contract. If the service provider thinks your computer or wiring may be at fault, various websites and computing magazines provide advice and suggestions.

Why does my area not have fibre-optic broadband?

Normally, wholesale network operators decide which type of infrastructure to provide, and usually only connect premises using fibre-optic cabling in larger urban areas where the population density makes it commercially viable.

Why is the distance of my premises from the telephone exchange relevant?

Although some areas have fibre-optic cable, most areas use copper telephone lines for broadband. The further

you are from the exchange, the weaker the signal will be. We will be asking suppliers to improve broadband for people who live far from an exchange.

Why does my connection speed vary during the day?

In areas where broadband is provided using copper telephone lines, the speed will decrease if more people are using the connection to the exchange at the same time. You may notice that speeds decrease late afternoon when schoolchildren return home and start using the internet.

When will my exchange get upgraded?

Wholesale network operators already have some plans in place. You can find out if an upgrade has been announced for your exchange at:

www.samknows.com

Our project will address exchange areas that operators are not planning to upgrade. It will take time - the Government aims for 90% of premises to have superfast broadband by 2015 - we hope most areas will receive improved services much sooner.

I've heard that there is a fibre-optic cable near my village - why can't we tap into this?

Many of these rumours are apocryphal. Some fibre-optic cables do bypass the local infrastructure - but there are invariably reasons why they can't be used - they are often owned by a private company. Where cables can be used, we will expect operators to find ways to do so. But the

key factor is to show that it is worthwhile for broadband providers to operate a service to your community.

Can I get a grant to install better broadband equipment at my premises as part of the £7.44m BDUK funding?

No - the BDUK funding is only available for improvements to the wholesale network.

I live in a remote area and I need better broadband now. What can I do?

If you live in a remote area, you may not be able to get a good signal using a 3G mobile aerial (often called a dongle). But there are several satellite broadband systems, and the costs for installation and monthly fees have come down. You'll have to assess whether satellite is suitable for your needs, and whether you're prepared to pay for it until the wholesale network is upgraded. Please make sure that you've completed our broadband survey at:

www.staffordshire.gov.uk/broadbandconsultation

What can my community do to support this project?

Please encourage everyone to complete our survey. Later, when the wholesale operator is ready to roll out improvements in your area, local people may be able to help with factors such as obtaining permission for cables to cross people's land, or with the cost of digging trenches to lay cable.

How can I get in touch?

You can contact us at:

sfbroadband@staffordshire.gov.uk