

Progress update: Connecting Devon and Somerset

The contract for Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) was signed with BT in January 2013 after a thorough procurement process. The £94 million project will make Devon and Somerset one of the best connected areas in the UK and is the largest programme of its kind in England.

By the end of 2016 in the CDS area:

- 91% of premises will have a fibre connection for superfast broadband of at least 24Mbps
- 100% of premises will have at least 2Mbps.

By 2020 all premises should be on superfast broadband of at least 24Mbps.

Although things appeared quiet for the Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) programme, there is a great deal of work going on in the background: establishing the partnership with BT, undertaking survey work and preparing for the roll out of high speed broadband fibre from Autumn this year and running through to the end of 2016, in agreement with BDUK and DCMS.

FTTC/FTTP

The combination of rural, urban and coastal geographies will offer various engineering challenges, but the most predominant technology will be fibre optic broadband.

Most of the programme area will receive Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC), where the fibre runs from the telephone exchange as far as the nearest BT street cabinet. This is the most cost efficient use of the available funds. It can deliver download speeds of up to 80Mbps and upload speeds of up to 20Mbps.

Fibre to the Premises (FTTP), where the fibre runs all the way to the home or business and which can deliver the top current download speed of 330Mbps, will also be available in certain areas. In addition, from Spring 2013, BT aims to make FTTP technology commercially available on demand in any area where fibre broadband has been deployed, should local businesses want the ultra-fast speeds it offers.

Openreach will install the fibre network which will be open to all communications providers (eg BT Retail, Sky, Talktalk etc) on an equal wholesale basis. Devon and Somerset consumers and businesses will therefore benefit from a highly competitive market, bringing greater choice and affordable prices.

Surveying

Surveying is already under way. The comprehensive survey work, a vital but complex stage of infrastructure planning, will be undertaken by BT engineers and their contractors. The survey work is essential in creating a detailed plan for each phase, ensuring an efficient deployment and keeping any disruption to a minimum.

Teams are examining the existing infrastructure, which will be used wherever possible; power requirements for over 1,500 new structures (includes 1,200 green street cabinets); securing landowner permission where required and ensuring compliance with planning regulations. This will lead to a detailed deployment plan that will determine how each area will link to the existing national fibre infrastructure. Survey work is expected to last between 6-9 months. It is not until all areas have been surveyed and we have a complete picture that final decisions can be made about precisely where and when the fibre infrastructure will be deployed in each constituency.

CDS had marked the beginning of the detailed survey phase of the fibre optic broadband roll-out with a launch event for key stakeholders including highway and traffic management officers, planners and power companies.

BT will connect Devon and Somerset to the existing national fibre infrastructure using 'Fibre Spines'. Over 1,200 green street cabinets with sophisticated fibre broadband technology will be placed in new locations across both counties, including the Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay areas. This volume of work across the entire geography of Devon and Somerset will require meticulous planning. Care needs to be taken with the positioning of new structures. For example, special consideration needs to be given to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Rural Community Broadband Fund

CDS have recognised that the process for applying for Defra's Rural Community Broadband Fund (RCBF) has been difficult for everyone, in particular around the availability of the rollout information. The contract that CDS signed up to with BT includes clauses regarding confidential information. These clauses are part of the BDUK agreements nationally and not something CDS could opt out of as an individual entity. CDS and BT are continuing to work with BDUK and Defra to resolve this.

A recent announcement from Defra had extended the RCBF Expression of Interest (EOI) stage, which does not require the roll out information, until 17th June. CDS and BT will continue to work with Defra and BDUK to work out ways that more information can be disseminated to communities applying for government funding.

Rollout Communication

The broader communications processes are still in discussion with BT to provide a template schedule for each phase. It is CDS' intention that information regarding the rollout plans will be steadily released over the life of the programme as survey work is completed and plans become more certain.

The primary source of this information will be the CDS website, which will soon include an interactive map similar to that available on the Superfast Cornwall website. Communications will continue using the channels CDS have been working with throughout the entire project so far:

- briefings to MPs, Members, District and Parishes
- newsletters including Local Council and Parish
- business and community engagement
- media including social media
- individual engagement etc.