

Public Meeting Record: Rural Broadband Delivery Across Taunton and Wellington Constituency

Date: Thursday 16 July 2026

Location: Cheddon Fitzpaine Memorial Hall

Chair: Gideon Amos OBE MP, Member of Parliament for Taunton and Wellington

Purpose of the Meeting

Gideon Amos OBE MP convened this public meeting to provide residents, parish councils and community representatives with an opportunity to question senior representatives from Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS), Building Digital UK (BDUK) and Openreach regarding rural broadband delivery, Project Gigabit, Airband's rollout, voucher schemes and the continuing challenge of securing fibre connectivity for hard-to-reach communities across the Taunton and Wellington areas.

The discussion focused particularly on communities affected by Airband's reduced rollout commitment, the future of Very-Hard-To-Reach-Premises (VHTRPs), the operation of voucher schemes, communications with affected communities and the role of Government subsidy in supporting broadband deployment where commercial delivery is not viable.

Panel Members

Matt Barrow

Stakeholder Engagement Officer, Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS)

Matt Barrow is the Stakeholder Engagement Officer for Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS). His role involves engagement with local authorities, broadband suppliers, parish councils, community groups and residents across the CDS programme area. CDS is the local authority-led partnership responsible for managing publicly funded broadband interventions across Devon and Somerset, including Bath & North-East Somerset and North Somerset. Mr Barrow's responsibilities include community engagement, programme communications, support for broadband voucher schemes and liaison with suppliers delivering CDS-supported broadband infrastructure.

Opening Remarks

Mr Barrow explained that CDS exists to intervene in areas of broadband market failure where commercial operators are unable or unwilling to deploy infrastructure without public subsidy.

He noted that the purpose of public subsidies in this area is to bridge the gap between the commercial cost of deployment and what suppliers will deliver through market mechanisms and the constraints these impose.

Mr Barrow advised that CDS is currently focused on:

- management of Airband Community Internet Ltd's remaining contractual commitments,
- support for Project Gigabit voucher projects and supplier-led solutions, and
- working with Openreach and a range of network providers to maximise delivery opportunities in hard-to-reach communities.

Mr Barrow explained that although CDS manages contracts and facilitates delivery, broadband rollout is constrained by supplier capacity, market conditions and commercial viability.

He advised that Airband remains contractually committed to completing Fibre-To-The-Premises rollout in the descope contract area (notably Cluster 13) by September 2027, as agreed with CDS in October 2024, notwithstanding current uncertainty surrounding the future ownership and financial position of the company.

Ian Isaacs

Local Delivery Lead, Building Digital UK (BDUK), Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)

Ian Isaacs is a Local Delivery Lead for Building Digital UK (BDUK), part of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). He works with local authorities, suppliers and broadband delivery partners across the South-West to support implementation of Project Gigabit and other Government-funded digital infrastructure programmes. His role includes supporting subsidy programmes, engagement with local delivery bodies and overseeing interventions intended to improve connectivity in hard-to-reach areas.

Opening Remarks

Mr Isaacs explained that BDUK's overarching objective is to support delivery of gigabit-capable broadband to 99% of UK premises by 2032 under the Government's flagship programme, Project Gigabit.

He outlined the principal delivery mechanisms available to Government, including:

- major subsidised broadband contracts,
- commercial broadband deployment,

- the Project Gigabit Voucher Scheme, and
- quarterly Open Market Reviews used to identify areas unlikely to receive commercial investment.

Mr Isaacs explained that BDUK works closely with CDS and broadband suppliers to identify gaps in coverage and secure solutions wherever possible.

He noted that suppliers remain constrained by both cost and delivery capacity and that Government cannot compel operators to deliver projects that are not commercially viable.

Mr Isaacs also advised that BDUK continues to monitor the consequences of Airband's reduced rollout and remains focused on identifying alternative pathways for affected communities.

Gavin Jones

Regional Engagement Manager, Openreach

Based in Cardiff, Wales, Gavin Jones is Regional Engagement Manager for Openreach and works with local authorities, elected representatives, communities and broadband delivery partners across Wales and parts of South-West England. Openreach is the United Kingdom's principal wholesale telecommunications infrastructure provider and is responsible for building and maintaining the physical network used by communications providers including BT, EE, Sky, TalkTalk and others.

Opening Remarks

Mr Jones explained that Openreach employs approximately 27,000 people nationally and is responsible for building, maintaining and operating telecommunications infrastructure across the United Kingdom.

He noted that Openreach does not sell broadband services directly to consumers but instead provides wholesale network access to communications providers who market services to households and businesses.

Mr Jones advised that Openreach had delivered full fibre connectivity to more than 37,000 premises across the Taunton and Wellington constituency.

He emphasised that many broadband challenges arise not simply because fibre infrastructure is absent, but because network design, engineering constraints, infrastructure capacity, permissions and deployment costs can all affect whether an individual premises can be connected.

Gideon Amos OBE MP

Member of Parliament for Taunton and Wellington

Mr Amos hosted the meeting as part of his ongoing work supporting improved rural broadband connectivity throughout the Taunton and Wellington areas.

He chaired the Q&A session and contributed to a number of exchanges concerning broadband funding, rural connectivity and Government policy.

He closed the meeting by reaffirming his commitment to advocate on behalf of communities affected by poor broadband provision and by pursuing further engagement with CDS, BDUK, Openreach and Government.

Q&A session

Question 1 - Neroche Parish Council

Question

They raised concerns regarding Airband's deployment difficulties and apparent shortages of infrastructure, particularly poles. They asked whether greater infrastructure sharing with Openreach or other operators was possible and whether parish councils could become more involved in helping resolve local deployment issues.

Response - Gavin Jones (Openreach)

Mr Jones explained that Airband is already able to use Openreach infrastructure where it is technically suitable to do so.

However:

- some poles are unsuitable for additional loading;
- some poles are not safe to climb or modify;
- replacement poles cannot always be installed owing to planning or environmental constraints; and
- National Grid infrastructure may also be subject to regulatory restrictions limiting its use.

A straightforward pole installation can cost several hundred pounds, although costs can increase significantly where there are engineering, traffic management, environmental or planning constraints.

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow stated that CDS would welcome greater community engagement where practical.

He suggested that where local communities are able to identify workable alternatives, CDS would encourage suppliers to explore those options.

Mr Barrow also acknowledged that CDS itself had experienced staff reductions, which had hindered engagement capacity.

Action: Mr Barrow offered to follow up directly with Neroche Parish Council regarding the issues raised.

Question 2 – Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council

Question

What happens when communities move between BT/Openreach and Airband delivery plans and can the connection plans for premises that remain without FTTP be clarified?

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow explained that even if headline coverage targets are achieved, the final proportion of unserved premises will not be evenly distributed.

He estimated that approximately 7-9% of premises across Devon and Somerset fall into the VHTRP category. These are the most difficult and expensive properties to connect and tend to be located in dispersed rural communities.

Response - Ian Isaacs (BDUK)

Mr Isaacs explained that subsidy support varies according to circumstances.

He noted that:

- VHTRPs can attract enhanced subsidy support;
- typical support levels are significantly lower than the connection costs associated with some rural properties;
- the hardest to reach premises may cost tens of thousands of pounds to connect; and
- in exceptional circumstances connection costs can exceed £100,000.

He stated that suppliers are often unable to justify deployment in such circumstances.

Question 3 - Pitminster Parish Council

Question

They highlighted a situation in which fibre infrastructure is present in the village but many residents remain unable to obtain FTTP. They explained that half of the village had been connected while the remainder had relied on voucher schemes that ultimately failed to deliver.

Response - Gavin Jones (Openreach)

Action: Mr Jones offered to review the circumstances of this particular case.

Response - Ian Isaacs (BDUK)

Mr Isaacs explained that proximity to fibre infrastructure does not necessarily mean a property can be connected.

Modern fibre networks utilise splitters and capacity-limited network architecture and, in some circumstances, the fibre infrastructure visible in a locality may have no spare capacity.

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow acknowledged that many residents perceive such situations as illogical.

He explained that broadband procurements often involve successive rounds of contracting in which FTTP is delivered to a subset of premises, leaving the remainder without a defined solution. This remainder typically comprises those premises that are least viable to connect from a commercial perspective.

Question 4 - Resident, Churchstanton

Question

They explained that fibre infrastructure exists very close to their property but no viable means of connection has been identified.

Response - Gavin Jones (Openreach)

Action: Mr Jones offered to investigate the specific location.

Response - Ian Isaacs (BDUK)

Mr Isaacs explained that nearby fibre infrastructure may already be fully committed within a particular network design and that visible infrastructure cannot always be used to provide additional connections.

Question 5 – A. N. Other

What happens if a contractor fails, as appears to have happened with Airband?

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow explained that Airband's current contract dates back to 2020.

He stated that:

- Airband's performance was poor initially but improved significantly over time;
- by late 2023, it had become one of CDS's strongest performing suppliers;
- progress slowed considerably during 2024; and
- a revised arrangement was negotiated resulting in a reduced contractual commitment in October 2024.

Mr Barrow acknowledged the uncertainty arising from Airband's current financial position but reiterated that the company remains contractually committed to delivering the descoped programme by September 2027.

He noted that Cluster 13 alone contained approximately 713 premises which fall within Airband's remaining obligations.

Question 6 - Resident, Curland**Question**

Who is holding Airband accountable and can responsibility for delivery be transferred elsewhere?

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow explained that CDS cannot simply transfer an existing contract to another supplier and that any alternative arrangement would require a new procurement process.

He reiterated that Airband remains contractually obligated to complete the agreed works.

He further noted that legal action against a financially distressed supplier would be counterproductive.

Question 7 - North Curry Parish Council

Question

They questioned whether the market-led approach to broadband provision is fundamentally failing rural areas and asked what politicians were doing to address the situation.

Response - Gideon Amos OBE MP

Mr Amos acknowledged widespread frustration in relation to broadband delivery.

He noted that:

- current market mechanisms are clearly failing some rural communities;
- increased investment in rural broadband infrastructure may be necessary;
- nationalisation is unlikely to provide a practical solution;
- there is a broader debate to be had regarding how rural deployment should be funded.

Action: Mr Amos reiterated his commitment to advocate on behalf of affected communities.

Question 8 - Stoke St Gregory Parish Council

Question

They sought clarification regarding the proportion of rural communities currently with access to gigabit-capable broadband and whether rural areas are disproportionately disadvantaged.

Response

Panel members broadly agreed that:

- rural communities face the greatest connectivity challenges;
- existing subsidy levels are often insufficient for the most remote locations;
- replacing a national copper network built over more than a century within a relatively short period presents significant challenges.

Mr Barrow suggested that many rural schemes require substantially greater subsidy than is presently available, with some potentially needing £10,000 or more per premises.

This discussion also considered:

- the wider Government infrastructure budget;
 - risks arising from digital exclusion;
 - increasing reliance on digital public services (e.g. NHS services); and
 - the need for a more integrated Government approach to digital infrastructure.
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Question 9 – Stoke St Gregory Parish Council

Question

How are communities without FTTP prioritised and what about the role of Starlink?

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow clarified that there is no formal mechanism for prioritising communities in terms of full fibre delivery.

Instead, deployment remains heavily influenced by supplier participation and commercial viability.

On Starlink, he advised that:

- it currently forms part of the available solution for some VHTRPs;
- it may offer substantial improvements where existing speeds are extremely poor;
- it is unlikely to provide a complete national solution; and
- capacity constraints may limit its long-term scalability.

The discussion also considered the limitations of satellite-based solutions in terms of future-proofing.

Question 10 – Resident, West Hatch

Question

Has the former 4G-wireless voucher scheme come to an end?

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow confirmed that the programme had closed after the available funding allocation had been exhausted.

He confirmed that it had proved highly successful and suggested that similar schemes may return in the future.

Response - Gideon Amos OBE MP

Mr Amos indicated that he would support calls for future schemes where evidence demonstrates effectiveness and local demand.

Question 11 - West Buckland Parish Council

Question

They described the experience of West Buckland residents following the loss of previously anticipated broadband delivery routes.

They expressed considerable frustration regarding communications and the difficulty many residents had experienced in obtaining accurate information.

They highlighted:

- the area's high concentration of VHTRPs,
- ageing copper infrastructure,
- dependence upon Starlink,
- concerns regarding future digital exclusion, and
- the risk that residents may be left behind by increasing digitalisation of services.

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow acknowledged the frustrations expressed.

He stated that the principal challenge remains the exceptionally high cost of rural deployment.

He observed that:

- suppliers are not permitted simply to abandon contractual obligations because projects become expensive;
- Airband had already invested substantial sums in infrastructure deployment; and
- the broadband delivery sector is experiencing significant commercial pressures.

Mr Barrow also reflected on the original "outside-in" philosophy of Project Gigabit, under which the hardest-to-reach premises should have been connected first.

He stated that market forces had instead resulted in a pattern of deployment which favoured commercially viable areas over hard-to-reach rural locations.

Mr Barrow advised that CDS had argued in favour of the original outside-in approach but that national policy had developed in a different direction.

Question 12 - Pitminster Parish Council

Question

They noted the considerable work undertaken by communities to organise voucher projects only for those projects to be withdrawn or cancelled.

They asked whether parish councils should begin pursuing alternative approaches.

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow explained that CDS had attempted to communicate the consequences of Airband's descopeing through correspondence with approximately 400 parish councils.

Question 13 - Hatch Beauchamp Parish Council

Question

They described a situation in which one part of the village had received full fibre broadband while another remained dependent upon a different supplier.

They asked whether providers such as Wessex Internet Ltd might offer an alternative route to delivery.

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow explained that subsidy arrangements remain constrained whilst Airband continues to hold contractual responsibility for certain areas.

As a result, alternative providers cannot simply intervene in locations affected by Airband's reduced deployment.

Question 14 - Resident, Stoke Hill

Question

They raised concerns regarding apparently unused ducting and fibre infrastructure associated with works undertaken by O'Connor Utilities in connection with the A358 corridor.

Response - Gideon Amos OBE MP

Action: Mr Amos indicated that he would raise the issue with National Highways to establish whether the infrastructure could support future broadband delivery opportunities.

Question 15 - North Curry Parish Council

Question

They reported receiving communication from Openreach to the effect that premises in the village might be included within a future commercial rollout programme.

Response - Gavin Jones (Openreach)

Mr Jones confirmed that the premises remained within Openreach's commercial plans but indicated that delivery was now anticipated in the FY 2027/28.

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow reiterated concerns about the remaining 7-9% of rural premises and cautioned against viewing satellite services alone as a complete long-term solution.

Question 16 – Resident, Churchstanton

Question

They asked when communities removed from the Airband contract would know whether they were considered very-hard-to-reach by Project Gigabit; they expressed wider concern over the adequacy of telecommunications in the parish.

Response - Ian Isaacs (BDUK)

Mr Isaacs advised that all premises remain under consideration for future interventions.

Action: BDUK will continue its work to identify suppliers capable of undertaking difficult voucher and rural deployment projects.

He acknowledged that supplier availability remains a significant challenge.

Question 17 – West Monkton Parish Council

Question

They asked whether new housing developments are prioritised over rural communities in terms of full fibre deployment.

Response - Ian Isaacs (BDUK)

Mr Isaacs explained that BDUK subsidy cannot be used for most new-build developments.

However, he acknowledged that major developments may absorb supplier resources and engineering capacity.

Response - Gavin Jones (Openreach)

Mr Jones noted that infrastructure investment associated with large developments can occasionally create improved capacity that subsequently benefits surrounding rural communities.

Response - Matt Barrow (CDS)

Mr Barrow added that some developers work exclusively with particular network providers, which may further complicate deployment planning.

Additional Points

Attendees also raised concerns regarding:

- the reliability of ageing copper wire infrastructure,
- the impact of vegetation on network performance, notably latency, and
- difficulties obtaining information concerning future deployment plans.

Panel members acknowledged these concerns and acknowledged the challenges associated with maintaining legacy infrastructure while simultaneously delivering nationwide full fibre rollout.

Key Themes Emerging from the Meeting

1. The Final 7-9%

The dominant issue throughout the meeting was how premises in hard-to-reach communities will be connected when commercial deployment is uneconomic.

2. Airband Uncertainty

Residents expressed significant concerns regarding Airband's descoped contract, its future viability and the continuing absence of clarity regarding replacement solutions.

3. Communication Failures

Many participants reported difficulty obtaining timely and reliable information from broadband providers and delivery bodies.

4. Insufficient Subsidy Levels

Panel members repeatedly suggested that existing subsidy regimes may not adequately reflect the true cost of connecting many VHTRPs.

5. The Limitations of Satellite Broadband

Whilst Starlink and similar services were acknowledged as valuable options for some communities, there was broad agreement that satellite connectivity alone is unlikely to provide a comprehensive long-term solution.

Commitments and Actions

Matt Barrow (CDS)

- To engage further with Neroche Parish Council regarding local infrastructure issues.
- To engage with the Parish Council and residents of West Buckland with a view to finding alternative, viable routes to FTTP.
- To continue supporting available voucher opportunities.
- To improve communication and stakeholder engagement.

Gavin Jones (Openreach)

- To review the specific cases raised where nearby infrastructure exists but FTTP remains unavailable.
- To provide follow-up information where appropriate.

Ian Isaacs (BDUK)

- To continue pursuing supplier participation in voucher projects for VHTRPs.
- To maintain oversight of communities affected by Airband's descope contract and current financial difficulties.

Gideon Amos OBE MP

- To continue advocating for improved rural broadband provision.
- To support efforts to secure future voucher opportunities.

- To raise the issue of unused ducts in the Stoke Hill area with National Highways.
 - To continue engaging with CDS, BDUK, Openreach and Government to secure a clear pathway to gigabit-capable connectivity for VHTRPs in the Taunton and Wellington areas.
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Closing Summary

The meeting highlighted the continuing challenges faced by communities across the Taunton and Wellington areas that are still awaiting gigabit-capable broadband connectivity.

Whilst significant progress has been made via Project Gigabit and commercial deployment, there was broad agreement amongst the panellists that the remaining unserved premises are those disproportionately difficult and costly to connect. Residents repeatedly expressed frustration regarding communication, uncertainty surrounding Airband's descope rollout and the absence of clear delivery pathways for some communities.

Panel members emphasised that efforts continue through supplier engagement, Project Gigabit interventions and voucher schemes.

Gideon Amos OBE MP concluded by reaffirming his commitment to maintaining pressure on Government, delivery bodies and suppliers to ensure that rural communities in particular are not left behind in the transition to a full-fibre, digital economy.

