

Support Your Community by Signing Up for Virgin Broadband

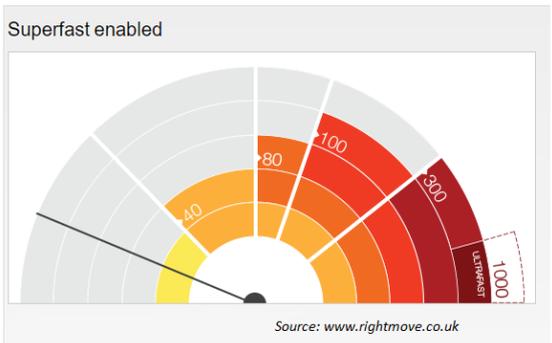
I have been involved in the telecommunications industry since market liberalisation in the 1980s. At that time, the Government's vision was the creation of a second national network, giving all consumers a choice of network supplier to their premises. However, the costs of providing a connection to every home were prohibitive, so rural areas have been denied the opportunities provided to towns and cities. Resellers (e.g. TalkTalk and PlusNet) all use the old BT copper network to provide local access in our villages. So-called 'Superfast' fibre to the cabinet services (BT Infinity, PlusNet fibre) are a temporary compromise designed to minimise BT Openreach's network costs by putting a little more fibre in the network, whilst avoiding making the investment of fibre connections to the home.

The old copper network is unreliable and rapidly running out of capacity to deliver the faster, higher bandwidth services that businesses, parents and children expect now; and will become a necessity in the future. Routine activities such as completion of school homework and working from home are making increasing use of fast data and video; and in a few years' time will become unworkable. Without a network upgrade, it will be like going back to dial-up, many broadband users will remember how frustrating that was. The cash-strapped NHS will create new services such as remote medical support for the elderly and infirm that depend on better connectivity.

House prices are now impacted by broadband availability and speed, which have become key criteria on estate agents' websites. The picture shows how Rightmove rates a Chilbolton postcode. Even though BT Openreach 'Superfast' fibre is available here, Rightmove scores the area in the lowest sector on the scale relative to market expectations for broadband speed.

Our house in Chilbolton recently switched to this 'Superfast' fibre broadband. We suffered constant network dropouts, often 20-30 times a day, making home

Broadband speeds for SO20 6AA



working impossible. It took BT Openreach engineers 12 visits, innumerable phone calls and over 7 months to reduce (but not fix) the problem. BT's eventual compensation payment of £120 was paltry relative to the inconvenience caused. One frustrated engineer told me, "You have to face up to the fact that the network in the whole area is creaking". The connection is only as reliable as the weakest (copper) link in the chain. Complete replacement (with fibre) is required, but BT has neither the will nor the funds. You may see notices placed on poles giving a misleading impression that fibre may be installed. This is merely a regulatory notice that enables other companies to fund local connections to the BT network – but has no firm plans to do this.

Today, our villages have a unique opportunity resulting from the fact that Virgin Media owns an old cable duct along the Test Way. This duct can be used as a springboard to provide a genuine all-fibre network to our villages. Virgin has unprecedentedly agreed to fund the bulk of construction costs, offering a subsidised connection charge of £300 that is a tiny fraction of the build cost. Ongoing service charges from BT and Virgin for equivalent services are broadly comparable and are set (and regulated) nationally, so our villages will get the same services as our towns and cities at the same prices.

This leaves homeowners and businesses with a simple decision:

1. Stay with your existing provider and risk our villages being perpetually left in the information slow lane; or,
2. Invest a tiny fraction of the true cost in helping Virgin build a future-proof network that will ensure our community can obtain the digital services experienced by the rest of the UK. An investment likely to be returned many times over eventually, via the price and ease of sale of the property.

In three decades in this industry I have not seen a better opportunity to provide up-to-date telecom services to rural homes and businesses. But for the community to benefit, we all need to support Virgin, meet the sign-up target and ensure the network is built. I encourage villagers to go to www.virginmedia.com/cablemystreet and sign up.

Answers to common questions (such as keeping your email address and exiting an existing contract) can be found in the FAQ section on www.tvneed4speed.co.uk.

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