

The Woodrow Community Broadband Scheme continues during COVID-19 restrictions



Since lock down began mid-March, the Woodrow Community Broadband Scheme have been pressing on with their bid for an improved broadband service in their area with their chosen supplier, the BT Community Fibre Partnership scheme. BT Community Fibre Partnership schemes allow communities to work with Openreach to improve broadband and this supplier is one of the options open the communities seeking to develop gigabit capable infrastructure.

Victoria Wharton who is one of the representatives driving the scheme in her community said 'before COVID-19 restrictions came in, there was a strong desire for the scheme amongst residents in our area. With speeds averaging around 1-3 Mbps, many of us struggle to carry out online activities which other areas of the county take for granted'.

The community therefore decided to take advantage of the Rural Gigabit Connectivity Voucher Scheme and the top up now available through the Digital Borderlands Voucher to develop their own project.

Victoria explained 'prior to COVID-19, all premises in the community had been approached via letter with an introduction to the scheme, the benefits it can bring and a briefing as to how this can be supported. We set up an email address at this stage to capture registrations of interest and any questions before our first meeting with Openreach and Connecting Cumbria. A facebook group was considered however we found there are members of the community who do not use social media; hence the decision to go with email'.

'In addition to this, many phone calls have taken place at evenings chasing responses to registrations of interest; discussing the scheme and generally raising awareness'.

Victoria added 'early contact has been essential to establishing whether there is the appetite to progress the scheme'.

In terms of self-dig to support the scheme and reduce the cost of delivery to Openreach, the community are firming up plans for self-dig for a proportion of the

route. Residents in the area have been asked to support this via agreements with landowners for land to be passed and access to be granted to Openreach for the life of the network for any future maintenance activity in support of the scheme and its success. The actual 'dig' itself will be placed as close to existing hedgerows as possible to prevent any obstacle to those who own and work the land and is anticipated to be carried out by a local contractor who is set to benefit when the scheme goes live with a faster connection to his home. Victoria added 'support from the community on this is thought to be vital to the schemes' success'.

COVID-19 is affecting the Woodrow community, it is home to families, businesses and residents, some of whom fall in to the 'at risk' category.

Victoria said 'online services have really come in to their own, we are all looking to our broadband service to support online banking, schoolwork apps, home working, searching for advice and guidance, looking for entertainment and most importantly of all, maintaining contact with friends and family. My fear is that our current speeds are struggling to cope with the needs of each of the premises in our area. I believe moving forward it is clear that this virus will bring about a major change in how we all communicate and conduct our lives as we settle in to home and business based living'.

Victoria continued 'we are progressing our scheme; whilst we have been on lock down emails have been sent to the community seeking their written agreement to participate in and adhere to the terms of the scheme. We hope to collect the majority of these agreements in via email however will use a safe back up plan for hard copy collection should this be required'.

Victoria told us how the scheme has built on the existing community spirit in the area 'we have collected contact details for many of the premises in our area as a result of their involvement in our broadband scheme, this has been vital in us reaching out with the offer of help and support at this current time. The restrictions and isolation faced by many is a challenging time; and a time when the community have to come together'.

The Rural Gigabit Connectivity scheme, run by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, provides funding of up to £1,500 per residential property or up to £3,500 per business property to support communities in developing their own gigabit capable networks. The Digital Borderlands Voucher scheme automatically tops-up Rural Gigabit Community vouchers in areas of Cumbria and Northumberland with access to less than 30Mbps so that the value of each voucher increases to up to £7,000 for SMEs and £3,000 for residential beneficiaries. Once the community team have gathered up agreement responses, they will seek a legal entity to represent them before making their application to their chosen supplier who will in turn apply for vouchers on behalf of the community.

We wish the Woodrow community the best of luck with this and look forward to following their journey to a full fibre solution.



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