

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am responding to the Ofcom consultation on the Strategic Review of Digital Communications.

The aspect on which I wish to comment is the failure of the existing strategy and market structure to provide an adequate broadband service in rural areas.

While I speak for myself, I have been active in lobbying for improved services to rural broadband users and consider myself able to represent the views of many, if not most, rural broadband users – or would-be broadband users.

While not necessary for survival, broadband has become as essential a utility as electricity in the modern era. Rural users, already at a disadvantage because of the distance from major shopping and administrative centres have suffered because of the failure of the existing strategy and structure to provide a service. The growing requirement to deal with banks, utilities and government online means that rural dwellers are unable to respond to the demands that these organisations make that we deal with them online. Rural people are put at a disadvantage by high fuel prices, where petrol stations exist, and would benefit from online shopping which is denied them by the existing system that is dominated by a single infrastructure supplier.

My personal experience has been of trying to live and work from home on Dartmoor and Exmoor. In Widecombe-in-the-Moor, on Dartmoor, it was only by extensive lobbying to the then, Regional Development Agency and BT, and the imperative to connect the local primary school, that we were able to achieve an upgrade of dial up internet to 8Mb/s.

When I moved to TQ13 7JB, also within the Dartmoor National Park, I reverted to receiving only 0.3 Mb/s. I complained to my ISP, Zen, but was told that if they complained to BT Open Reach, Open Reach would simply declare the line unfit for broadband and I would have no service. Zen, and it would seem I, had to lump it.

As a result of this experience it became clear to me that ISPs, like Zen, are in thrall of and totally at the mercy of BT Open Reach which exercises a bullying monopoly over the broadband and telephone infrastructure. It was only by spending a great deal of time and effort complaining directly to BT, writing to the chief executive, that the speed I received was delivered at the line's actual capacity, 1Mb/s – not ideal but something that should have been achievable by my ISP's efforts but they were clearly too scared of offending BT Open Reach and being disadvantaged that they would not complain.

Because I required a better service I resorted to satellite broadband that, although it offered higher speeds, proved totally unsatisfactory as the latency means the delay between sending a message from one's computer and receiving a new page when browsing is painfully slow. Satellite is not an alternative to landline broadband.

When I moved to Exmoor I again engaged Zen to provide both my telephone and my broadband. They, of course, were dependent on BT Open Reach who refused to install the services when I required them. When BT Open Reach decided to make an appearance their own engineer confirmed that they had not surveyed the lines prior to the visit and that the lines were unusable. I asked Zen to press BT Open Reach to resolve the issue quickly but was told that if Zen approach BT Open Reach to pressure them, BT Open Reach would, "Simply put the phone down" on Zen.

This was the experience of a near neighbour who had recently moved in. The telephone lines could have been surveyed before they sent an engineer and they should have been maintained in a useable condition. The broadband I have is slow and intermittent, typical of so many rural areas.

It is quite outrageous that members of the public simply cannot contact and complain to BT Open Reach which refuses to speak to anyone but ISPs. It is reminiscent of a religious sect, the Plymouth Brethren who are said to speak only among themselves and the clergy of the Plymouth Brethren speak only to GOD!

BT, the parent of BT Open Reach, has been allowed to have things their own way dictating to ISPs as to timing and procedure and holding the threat that if the ISPs do not kow-tow, they will be put at a disadvantage when applying for services on behalf of their customers.

BT has failed to provide rural broadband services waiting for the government to step in with funds. BT then cherry picks the best and most profitable provision in the areas for which grants have been awarded leaving outlying areas with no better service.

BT trumpets that it is providing broadband to 90% of the population – but that is not 90% of the country as it excludes rural areas.

BT speaks about supporting the “rural rollout” of broadband when in fact it is more a “rural rollback” - rolling back the opportunities for business, education and entertainment in rural areas by neglecting investment and its social responsibilities. It has all the arrogance of a monopoly and exhibits this by bullying ISPs.

In the first instance I call on Ofcom to make urgent provision for rural broadband – for example only granting expanded licences to the likes of BT on condition that they meet their obligations to provide rural broadband.

A better alternative would be for BT to be obliged to divest itself of BT Open Reach so that an independent telecoms infrastructure company or, ideally, more than one in a proper, competitive market place, will exist to respond to the needs of consumers and ISPs and not be the self-serving monolith that is BT and BT Open Reach.