

Stoke St Gregory is a village in Somerset with a population of approximately 1000. Following Phase 1 of the superfast broadband rollout in this area, 50% of the village has access to superfast, but about 30% have no access to fibre and are languishing on between 1 and 5 Mbps, mostly at the lower end. There is no immediate prospect of any improvement to this state of “digital apartheid”, which is one of the most serious problems facing the village.

Our experience of trying to engage with BT as a community to find a solution to the problem has been disappointing. They have appeared complacent, secretive and unconstructive. They refuse to discuss anything other than doing things their way in return for large sums of money which they arrive at without any accountability.

It seems clear to us that BT's primary aim is to maximise short-term profit, and that the monopoly position in which they find themselves has allowed them to run rings around Connecting Devon & Somerset, the body charged with managing the rollout locally.

BT remains wedded to the old and unreliable copper network which they inherited from the GPO. There are much better solutions for delivering faster speeds to far-flung (or even not so far-flung) properties than the universal FTTC proposed by BT, and it seems to us essential that the regulatory framework by which BT is effectively able to hold large parts of the country to ransom be modified both to let in new players and to motivate BT to raise their game.

BT's current strategy of threatening litigation if Ofcom separates it from OpenReach is entirely symptomatic of the bullying tactics which they have employed at every level. We would urge Ofcom to defend the interests of communities throughout the country by eliminating the conditions that enable BT to behave like this. The separation from OpenReach may be a part of that, but more important is giving third party companies access to existing fibre networks and levelling the playing field so as to break BT's effective monopoly.

Ofcom needs to act to force BT to support the development of a true 21st century digital infrastructure, as it easily could, rather than being the principal impediment.