



## Berwickshire Community Broadband Project - Suspended

Several community councils (CCs) in Berwickshire have suspended pursuit of a community-led project to deliver superfast broadband (defined as a download speed of at least 30mbps) to their mostly rural residents. Why, after several years of concerted effort, has this become necessary? We have outlined the story below.

At the end of 2015, surveys were carried out across five CCs (Abbey St Bathans, Bonkyl & Preston, Gavinton, Fogo & Polwarth, Gordon & Westruther, Grantshouse, and Lammermuir) to gauge demand for better broadband. As expected, most respondents reported dire internet speeds and were desperate for faster broadband. We therefore approached a government [agency](#), set up in 2012, to help communities develop broadband projects to deliver the services we all need.

Based on our surveys, in March 2016, Community Broadband Scotland (CBS) agreed to support the development of a community-led Berwickshire broadband project. A consultation process then took place to ensure state funds would only be used where suppliers are unwilling to invest (market failure). This process took 18 months, but in August 2017, CBS set aside £845k for the Berwickshire Community Broadband Project to cover about a quarter of properties within the five CCs. The remaining properties would (supposedly) be covered by commercial suppliers or the [Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband](#) (DSSB) rollout programme due for completion by the end of 2018. Clearly the fact that 75% of properties in our communities were excluded from the project was a major issue.

Meanwhile during the 18-month period of defining our project scope, external events occurred which affected all CBS projects:

- in September 2016, the Scottish Government (SG) announced plans to bring superfast broadband to all properties in Scotland by 2021, known as the [R100](#) programme. It was initially unclear how R100 would interact with CBS projects in preparation
- several CBS projects failed to attract bids from suppliers, mainly because of the high cost of bidding for relatively small projects
- the ongoing DSSB rollout programme has exceeded targets releasing an extra £15m for the programme. This has reduced the number of project properties, making it less attractive for contractors to bid for the project. Moreover, with fewer connections, the completed network will generate less operational revenue
- in early 2017, discussions were held with the larger [Borders Community Broadband Project](#), also pursuing CBS funding (£1.9m approved), to explore prospects of combining into a single project.
- following a seminar in March 2017 in the Borders, convened by Calum Kerr MP, we approached [Broadband for the Rural North](#) (B4RN), a privately funded community broadband project in Lancashire for advice and possible support. B4RN have created what is probably the best and fastest community broadband service in the world, an amazing achievement, which avoids the constraints imposed by 'state aid'. Unfortunately, in May 2017, B4RN decided against expansion into Scotland.

- in August 2017, CBS was absorbed into R100, raising the question as to whether the Berwickshire project should accept CBS grant funding, or withdraw and wait for R100

In October 2017, following meetings with CBS and R100, the Berwickshire Community Broadband Project decided to withdraw from CBS. Later, the Borders broadband project, referred to above, also withdrew. The main reason for pulling out was the unacceptable risk that R100 could not guarantee to act as a 'safety net' should a CBS-funded project fail for any reason as several already had. In addition, CBS funds (from EU) could not be transferred to R100 (UK/Scotland).

SG's efforts to deliver broadband to date have been fragmented, to put it mildly. Suffice to say that the mismatch between broadband hype and reality continues to cause widespread frustration. We are repeatedly told that 95% of properties are already 'connected' to fibre-enabled street cabinets. However, broadband service remains abysmal for many domestic and business users located more than a mile or so from a cabinet ('long lines' issue). This is evidenced by ongoing complaints in the media from all quarters.

This is a very disappointing outcome for all those community members who had spent several years trying to secure superfast broadband for rural Berwickshire. While R100 will hopefully achieve this, we believe many 'remote' rural properties will remain excluded. The details of these won't be known for several years, albeit at that point, there may be a role for community projects to serve them. In the meantime, the waiting and uncertainty continues. Concerns remain that 'difficult' properties may be offered costly and inferior services delivered by satellite or mobile networks.

It is envisaged that R100 will be executed through three regional contracts across Scotland, with works due to start in 2019 for completion by 2021. Programme details have not yet been announced. Communities will play little if any part. Communities will be more than disappointed if R100 doesn't deliver superfast broadband to everyone by 2021. We sincerely hope it all goes to plan.

A small crumb of comfort is that, depending on location, superfast broadband is already available in the GFPCC area, and across the Merse towards Berwick upon Tweed. The service has been ongoing for over six years, and is supplied by [Briskona](#), a Scottish based company with over 340 customers in Berwickshire (over 1,000 in Scotland).

Current estimates of broadband coverage and speeds across the Borders and your postcode area are given at this [weblink](#).

Tim Jackson (GFPCC broadband representative)

Keith Dickinson (GFPCC chair)

Nov 2017

This article reflects our views as representatives of GFPCC, and ours alone.

[project map - next page]

