

SSP response - Westwell Parish Council 13/03/19

Good morning,

Westwell Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on this statement, as follows. Westwell is a rural parish in Kent. It is no way remote : it is only 4 miles from Ashford which is 37 minutes by high speed train from central London . However, it has generally poor mobile phone connectivity and poor broadband anywhere away from the specific areas that have been upgraded by Openreach. We were recently greatly encouraged recently when we observed four Openreach vans working in one of the rural roads lanes in the parish. Fibre at last ? Encouragement turned to despair when the engineer said they were replacing the copper because of damage by squirrels . What a missed opportunity.

In the village, which has a revitalised pub, communications including calling for taxis home are often well nigh impossible because of poor cellphone.

Some people's phones work, others not at all. Roaming would help enormously . Westwell parish would thoroughly support the proposal in paragraph 31 to require roaming.

The last time the water utility company closed the road because of a broken pipe there was no one in attendance, but there was phone number to ring : parish residents needed to know when the road would reopen. There was no connection because there was no mobile phone signal at the road closure.

We have also noticed that car hire companies and breakdown assistance require and assume cellphone connection . If you break down , the assistance company finds you by the location of the phone on which you made the call . As rural roads are also often those that have wheel-breaking potholes, provision of mobile phone signal everywhere is an emergency requirement. This is not just about major roads.

Broadband is now as universal and essential as a requirement as any other utility : it is difficult to operate without being online. Government and companies " turn off paper " as a default.

Poor broadband has become an element of substandard living and poverty, unless you are one of the few who fight to remain not digitally dependent by choice.

Rural areas have many businesses - people working from home , as well as rural enterprise. It is impossible for these to thrive without broadband that is actually high speed .

A recent project over many months to improve broadband at both ends of a rural road has foundered because one end is connected to one box and the other is at the end of a long weak connection to a different box . It seems impossible to connect the poorly supplied customers to the stronger connection. What seems so obvious but is apparently unachievable is very frustrating.

One aspect of the disadvantage and discrimination for those in rural areas is that the lower density of customers discourages BT from investing in infrastructure.

The Royal Mail commitment is universal. BT should be also.

We hope these examples help to give insight on why better and more logical broadband and cellphone roaming would be transformative for a rural parish that is surprisingly badly connected currently .