

BACKGROUND PAPER - TELECOMMUNICATIONS - December 2015

1. Introduction

This Paper has been produced from research by members of a Working Group for the Neighbourhood Plan. Its objective is to provide information about the telecommunications infrastructure in the Parish which the Neighbourhood Plan may need to address. The poor quality of local telecommunications, and in particular broadband services, were raised by local residents and businesses in the Parish Survey and other research carried out for the Neighbourhood Plan..

Government planning policy embodied in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and subsequent guidance, says that planning and local plans should support the expansion of electronic communications networks, including telecommunications and high speed broadband. Advanced, high quality communications infrastructure is essential for sustainable economic growth. The development of high speed broadband technology and other communications networks also plays a vital role in enhancing the provision of local community facilities and services, and in supporting and sustaining local communities including those in rural areas.

The NPPF does not actually refer to Neighbourhood Plans in the context of telecommunications but the Local Plan is the main part of the Development Plan for the area and it is intended that the Neighbourhood Plan will eventually become part of the Development Plan. Therefore it is appropriate for the Neighbourhood Plan to seek to make provision for the improvement of telecommunications in the Parish.

2. Telephone Services via land lines

Telephone services via land lines are subject to “universal service obligation” legislation. This means they must be provided to any property or development (which is permitted) on request at standard (installation) rates charged to the customer. This effectively means that all of the Parish can and must be provided with telephone services via land lines. However in some of the most remote locations in the Parish (e.g. in afforested areas well away from existing development and existing telephone lines) the cost of installation to serve a new development may be high. Locations close to existing development and the main settlements would normally be cheaper and easier to provide with telephone services. According to the NPPF and other planning guidance, the provision of telephone services via land lines can be a planning requirement placed on new development.

3. Mobile Telephone Services

Mobile telephone services including 2G, 3G and 4G services are not subject to a “universal service obligation” and are therefore provided on a commercial basis. All mobile phone networks claim to provide a full and good service within and close to the M25 which is about 10 miles to the north of the Parish. The reality, however, is that locally some networks provide better service than others. Planning law does not require the provision of mobile telephone services (reception) and it cannot be a cost placed upon a development, nor a determinant in the choice of location of new development. However, planning guidance suggests that Neighbourhood Plans can, if necessary, help the provision of mobile telephone services in an area by indicating where new masts should (and should not) be sited.

4. Broadband Services

Broadband services, including high speed broadband are not subject to a “universal service obligation” despite successive government exhortations that all areas - including rural areas - and all new development should be provided with the opportunity to receive them. Broadband services are therefore normally provided on a commercial basis which depends on sufficient contributing demand to make new installations viable. Sometimes local authorities and other bodies are prepared to make a contribution to installation.

There are several means of providing high speed broadband although the best are via fibre optic line or by cable. The most common means and that which is currently available in Ewhurst village at least, is Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC). These “Green Cabinets” are located around largely built-up areas from which the service then goes by copper cable (telephone lines) to individual premises. However FTTC only provides the highest speeds to properties closest to the “Green Cabinets”, with speeds decreasing progressively beyond 1000 metres. At present “Green Cabinets” are almost exclusively sited in or near Ewhurst village. FTTC cannot be extended from an existing property to another nearby, and there is a limit to the number of properties which can be served by each cabinet. This could be significant locally since, the body which is co-ordinating wider provision of high speed broadband in Surrey (SuperFast Surrey) has reported that some of the “Green Cabinets” in Ewhurst village now have very limited spare capacity to serve new subscribers.

One alternative to FTTC is Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) which provides services direct to a property over a land line. It is costly to install but - in theory at least - can provide good speed and reliability. However, according to Superfast Surrey it is actually rather slow and poor in the Neighbourhood Plan area, since it depends on where a property is located. Some remote premises can use wireless and satellite systems but these are expensive and not a viable option for most new or existing developments.

At present, the best option for securing reliable, high speed broadband is Fibre to the Premises (FTTP or FTTHome and FTTBusiness) which avoids the use of copper cable. It can also be extended from premise to premise without the capacity limitations of “Green Cabinets” and copper cables. However, some Installers consider it is not normally commercially viable to provide FTTP to existing property in the Neighbourhood Plan area without a subsidy from some source. On the other hand, the additional cost of installing FTTP to new development is low as the fibre optic line can be included in the phone line ducting. If, when providing FTTP to a new development, “community access points” are included along the route, it may become more viable and feasible to provide FTTP to existing nearby premises. It could be acceptable for the Neighbourhood Plan to try to facilitate the provision of FTTP to all new development, so bringing the potential for its extension to more of the existing properties in the community.

5. The implications for the Neighbourhood Plan

Landline services

- The provision of telephone services via land lines can be made a planning requirement placed on new development.

Mobile phone services

- if necessary, the NP can help the provision of mobile telephone services in an area by indicating where new masts should (and should not) be sited.

Broadband services

- All new developments including major conversions and changes of use could be required to be provided with both traditional phone lines (copper cable) and FTTP (fibre optic line). This could be made a planning/development requirement.
- All new installations of FTTP could also be required to have one or more “community access points” along their route. This could be a planning obligation (planning gain) placed upon permission for a new development. It may then become more feasible for FTTP to be extended to other properties.
- It may also be appropriate to consider the potential for extending FTTP to the wider community as one of the social and economic sustainability criteria for selecting the location of new housing development. This would ascribe a positive benefit or advantage to those site options which offer the greatest potential for extending FTTP to part or all of the local community. This could be justified, in NPPF terms, as part of supporting and sustaining the local community, its economy and its services.

Sources:

Superfast Surrey, BT Infinity, BT Outreach.