

# **BROADBAND IN EAST HAMPSHIRE HANGERS**

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I get emails from residents about all sorts of issues, from flooding to speeding. Recently I have had quite a lot of messages about verge-cutting. But during the coronavirus crisis the number one issue for people getting in touch has been slow broadband. This is hardly surprising since we have all been stuck at home where we are reliant on broadband for work, entertainment and communication with family and friends.

I thought it would be helpful to summarise the current position and provide some advice for those who would like faster broadband speeds.

Following a £28m Hampshire County Council (HCC) investment programme, superfast broadband coverage within Hampshire currently stands at 96.2% and the programme is adding more network this year, via an Openreach contract. However, in East Hampshire we are slightly lower than the overall County percentage at 94.4%. Recent successes have included the roll-out of Fibre to the Premises for most of Froxfield and Fibre to the Cabinet for most of Colemore, Hawkley and Liss.

During the planning of the roll-out, superfast broadband was defined as speeds of 24 Mbps (Megabits per second). However, OFCOM have recently changed the definition of superfast to 30 Mbps. It is a good idea to check your broadband speed periodically because network changes behind the scenes can make a difference. If you search "Broadband speed checker" you will find several online tools. I like to use the Which Broadband Speed Checker because I suspect that it is the most independent.

In East Hampshire, there are 1,159 properties with broadband speeds below 10 Mbps which is about 15% of the County total for properties in this category. This is a reflection of the fact that we are a largely rural district. If you live in

one of these properties, you have my sympathy. I know how frustrating it can be.

I strongly advise everyone with less than 10 Mbps first to use the postcode checker on the Openreach website to see whether a Fibre product is available to you. There are some households that are unnecessarily still struggling with a basic broadband package because they are unaware that they could order Fibre now.

If Fibre is not available to you now, I am afraid there is no magic wand which can improve your speeds immediately. I do however have some positive things to share! There are two options which you can pursue now, and there are two possibilities in the near-term horizon which could make a big difference. So what can you do now?

1. Use the new “Universal Service Obligation” (USO) to request minimum speeds of 10 Mbps from BT. The USO came into effect in April 2020 – more information is available on the OFCOM website.
2. Apply for a Community Fibre Partnership by teaming up with neighbours (the more the better) and applying on the Openreach website. Openreach will do the planning and give you a quote. You get an automatic Rural Gigabit Voucher discount of £1,500 per household and £3,500 per business. There may be a balance to pay but Hampshire County Council has a top-up fund of £1m which could be applied to.

Those are the two options available now. For those who are prepared to be patient, I do believe there are grounds for optimism about the coming 12-18 month period. This is for two reasons:

Firstly, the technology is improving all the time and mobile signals are also improving. 5G could be a game changer for remote rural properties over the coming 18 months. The government and industry are committed to full 5G coverage across the UK by 2022 and new masts are going up every month. The cost of 4G and 5G dongles (which use the network to provide wifi in your

home) is also coming down. Mobile signals in rural areas can be greatly enhanced by using an external aerial and amplifier. Aerials can be installed quickly and relatively cheaply in most cases. Using this technique can enable signals to be received in areas where normal handsets are unable to get a service at all. Each of the four main suppliers (EE, Vodafone, O2, Three) offer fixed location data tariffs for reasonable rates. These are cheaper than standard mobile phone data contracts. So as soon as the mobile signals improve this mobile data solution will become a highly attractive option for many houses.

Now I come to the second cause for optimism, which is this: the Conservative Government is determined to deliver on its manifesto commitment to achieve “gigabit broadband coverage” for every home by 2025. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has secured funding from HM Treasury of £5bn over a five-year timeframe to deliver on this commitment.

DCMS is developing plans to deliver a supply-side proposal which is likely to involve procurements, run centrally by DCMS, to secure delivery of gigabit capable broadband services to bundles of premises. DCMS has indicated that it will target the 20% of premises in the UK which market forces will not reach. DCMS plans to create bundles for procurement of 3,000 premises at a time. HCC cannot predict when bundles relating to Hampshire will enter the procurement process, but we remain actively engaged with DCMS to influence this process. We will know more about the location of any Hampshire bundles later this year. Fingers crossed!

The Internet has effectively become a utility which is integral to our everyday lives. I hope that this article makes you feel more positive about the future of rural broadband and I hope that some of you will be able to successfully explore the opportunities mentioned above for improving your broadband speeds.