

## RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

### DRAFT BUDGET 2017-18; BROADBAND

#### SUBMISSION FROM ARDGAY & DISTRICT COMMUNITY COUNCIL

We would like to refer you to Scottish Rural Action's report, *Broadband Working Group Report 2016* published on 8<sup>th</sup> September. This can be found on the Scottish Rural Parliament's website:

[www.scottishruralparliament.org.uk/broadband](http://www.scottishruralparliament.org.uk/broadband)

This excellent and very readable report distils into one document the difficulties experienced by those of us who live in rural Scotland; so much so that the authors might have been describing our experience here in the Ardgay & District Community Council area.

The communities in the Kyle of Sutherland have been working with Community Broadband Scotland through our local development trust, The Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust, for over a year.

Steered by Community Broadband Scotland (CBS):

- We have identified all the postcodes which contain premises which we know will be too far away from the green cabinets to get superfast broadband.
- We have hand delivered a letter and survey to them all and received back massive support.
- We passed this information onto CBS who then consulted with BT.
- We waited for this consultation to proceed.
- We now, September 2016, are told the scheme isn't viable as only 16 of the original post codes are "available" for a community scheme and these are scattered in their ones and twos to the far ends of the Kyle of Sutherland area.
- We are now told that, "better broadband will be available to more of the Kyle of Sutherland area through the mainstream programme." *Sarah Marshall, CBS*
- We are now told to wait while CBS and BT look at all this information again, "at a premises level" to see which premises will and will not get superfast broadband.

No dates, no information, no timescale have been given.

Ardgay & District has an excellent Community Council Newsletter in which you can read, in the Spring 2016 edition, the interview with Sarah Marshall, CBS following the November 2015 public meeting. And in the latest edition, Autumn 2016, which you should receive shortly, you can read Sarah's update. The newsletters are also available on the A&D CC website:

<http://ardgayanddistrictcommunitycouncil.org.uk/about/newsletters/>

There is something seriously wrong with the way this "rollout" is being handled with Community Broadband Scotland unaccountable to those it is meant to serve – and

apparently unable to move things forward in a sensible manner due to restrictions placed on its mode of operating, particularly the use of postcodes (see next para). This is spelled out in Scottish Rural Action's report, *Broadband Working Group Report 2016* and corroborated by our experience here in the Kyle of Sutherland. It has also resulted in several other 'failed' schemes - <http://www.blackislecommunitybroadband.co.uk/> tells the story of the Black Isle proposed scheme.

The use of postcodes to identify properties in the Highlands is ill-advised. Each postcode outside of village envelopes can cover several miles, extending from a property which will potentially be able to benefit from BT rollout to one which definitely will not, yet the whole postcode is treated as unavailable for inclusion in a CBS scheme. This is even allowed to over-ride the more obvious & longstanding grouping of BT exchange areas! For example, to the west of Ardgay is the small exchange of The Craigs. This is an EO exchange offering broadband speeds of about 0.5 Mbps and most unlikely to benefit from BT rollout until the very end of the scheme. It is deemed to have no plans at present! Yet 2 of the 3 postcodes covered by The Craigs have been deemed by BT to be unavailable to a potential CBS scheme.

The mainstream providers, the "experts", in this case BT, should not be allowed to "cherry pick" the profitable premises and reject the less lucrative making it impossible for other suppliers or a community owned broadband company to deliver a viable project in the area. Government structures and "rules" appear to hinder progress. The programme time scales are too long and have resulted in disillusionment. The whole process has been overly complicated by the willingness of government to allow the commercial providers to opt out of the "difficult to do stuff", leaving it instead to be provided by communities of unqualified volunteers. The whole picture is further complicated because the "goal posts" keep moving and at each stage the arrival of broadband recedes further into the future.

Ours is not a community which shies away from doing things for itself. In addition to buying our Post Office using the Scottish Land Fund there are currently three major projects in the Kyle of Sutherland all driven by the community: The Kyle of Sutherland Youth Hub, the rebuilding of the Falls of Shin visitor centre and the regeneration of the Ardgay village centre.

In 2015 this community was looking forward to developing a community led service which would reach everyone. As 2016 draws to an end we are told the so-called good news, that if we just wait, again, BT superfast will reach further. In reality it is likely that many premises will experience no improvement at all in their already very slow broadband.

What, in these circumstances, can we ask you to do to? First of all to be aware that this is a general situation which needs to be addressed. Then to decide the best course of action in influencing the departments and agencies who should be providing us all with superfast broadband in the shortest possible time. It is time to move away from BT and the traditional way of supplying Broadband to the hard to reach areas & start looking at wireless or satellite connectivity to be provided with the

same subsidies, and at similar costs to the consumer, that BT have for supplying to rural areas.

Ardgay & District Community Council  
November 2016