

Chapter 17

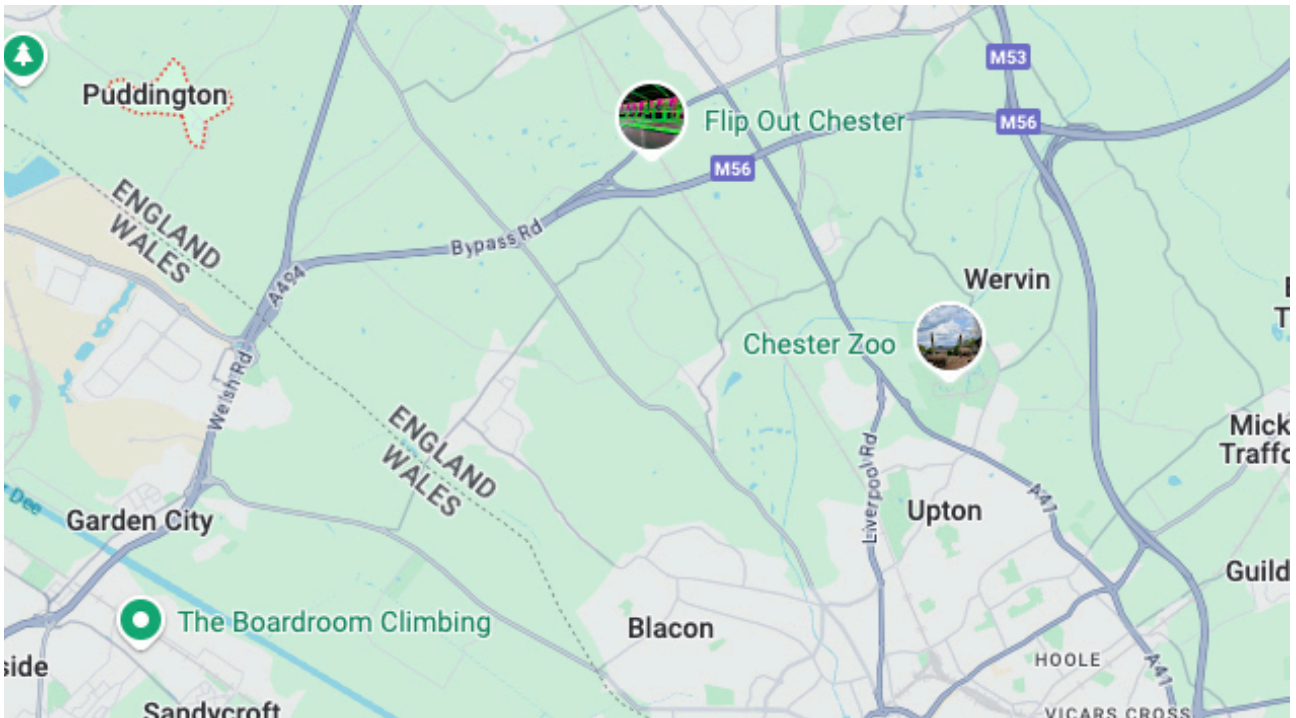
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Cheshire

Puddington and the Politics

By Pete Delaney

Puddington inadvertently found itself stuck in the middle of a fight not of its own choosing, as BT and B4RN struggled with the government over who should pay to bring fibre to the village homes.

The situation attracted media attention in the form of an article in the ISPreview ([read it here](#)). It provides details of the somewhat Kafkaesque situation the village found itself in at the hands of BT Openreach and BDUK, the government's broadband funding authority.

The B4RN project in Cheshire had its genesis some time ago, back in 2013 in fact. At the time, the villages of Puddington, Burton and Shotwick, all tucked up together in the northwest corner of Cheshire, were on ADSL.

Puddington, where I live, had 1 or 2 Mbps (or even nothing at all) as it was at pretty much the maximum reach from the nearest BT exchange in Neston. Nearby Burton, the largest village, was slightly closer to Neston but service was still firmly in single digit Mbps. The tiny village of Shotwick, being the furthest from the exchange, was more or less devoid of any broadband services.

My own service was 1Mbps and almost useless. When searching for a solution to this, I came across the B4RN website. Dot (my wife) and I booked into one of the early Show and Tell days at the Lancaster House Hotel.

To say it was a revelation was an understatement.



We attended the showtell day and climbed aboard the gigabus.



We see live demonstrations and Barry tells us how it all works.

People investing their own money in a network they build themselves was such a simple, comprehensible and attractive proposition that was already delivering gigabit broadband into the most remote (and beautiful) areas of Lancashire. The energy of Chris and Barry and the JFDI philosophy was so addictive (and still is, I might add).

I was convinced we could do something similar in rather less rugged Cheshire. Sadly, before that really got underway, Openreach started deploying FTTC in the area in 2014 and so we waited until we found out what that delivered.

In the end, it amounted to the installation of a single FTTC cabinet in the centre of Burton.

An uneven mesh of speeds across the three villages was the result, which is fairly typical of FTTC deployment in rural areas. The centre of Burton, nearest the new cabinet, could get close to 80Mbps but speeds fell away rapidly, leaving some with disappointing improvements in speed or none at all. Mine went to 10Mbps (and still is) but others remained on ADSL due to the shorter range of FTTC. Shotwick was too far away from the cabinet to show any improvement.

After a while, it became clear there was still a lot of dissatisfaction with broadband speeds and little prospect of them improving anytime soon. This was despite us lobbying BT Openreach, which showed no interest at all in bringing FTTP to the area.

Cheshire hyperfast and B4RN Cheshire

As Barry Forde had made clear, backhaul (the internet feed) was key to B4RN projects. In B4RN's Lancashire heartland, this requirement was usually satisfied with organic expansion; new projects growing outwards from the periphery of existing projects.

I had been thinking about a B4RN-like project again but it would be difficult to realise. B4RN had made the original concept big enough to support the building of their own core network. It seemed unlikely we would have a big enough footprint to make this economically viable or to build it in a reasonable timescale.

However, I discovered that Zayo (Geo networks at the time), whose dark fibre network connected B4RN projects to B4RN core router(s) in the internet exchanges, ran fibre right through our area.

A bit more research located an access point to the Zayo network.

Now we had the prospect of being able to connect to the B4RN core network and thus be a regular B4RN project.

The idea of a B4RN project was enthusiastically received by local landowners and the parish council.

If we could persuade B4RN to support us, we had a project.

After much discussion, B4RN agreed we could start our own B4RN project and by early 2017, we were underway as Cheshire Hyperfast.

At this time another group, based in the nearby village of Capenhurst, expressed a wish to be included. We really needed to expand our footprint anyway to support the cost of the backhaul. Our project group grew to include Capenhurst and the nearby hamlets of Two Mills and Woodbank. A little later Ness, on the outskirts of Neston, also joined the group.

So now we had a contiguous footprint (moving north to south) including some 1100 properties: Ness, Burton, Puddington, Shotwick, Woodbank, Two Mills and Capenhurst.

From this point, for a while anyway, it was a normal B4RN project; packed public meetings, network planning, costing, encouraging investment, recruiting volunteers, bickering.....

We also changed our name to B4RN Cheshire at the end of 2017.

In February 2018, I found a guy in a high-vis jacket with a tablet computer rummaging in the undergrowth near my house in Puddington. He was an Openreach contractor surveying assets for an FTTP build 'because of B4RN'. He offered this information without prompting and without knowing who I was.

The first Gigabit Voucher Scheme (GBVS) launched in March 2018. This didn't have much of an impact on us as the eligibility rules were geared more towards business connections.

Completely out of the blue in late 2018, Openreach started an FTTP build in Ness and Burton. This proceeded steadily through 2019 and fibre was also extended to the centre of Puddington. This did cause delays to our build while the footprint was redesigned to take account of the Openreach build.

The reduced footprint that included Puddington and part of Burton was finalised and in early 2021, B4RN commenced building after we had a rapid voucher signup campaign that resulted in 80 applications.



Preparing for the cabinet.



Will meets the team.



Will Dehany comes to blow house fibre.



The B4RN team arrives for house and core blows.

By early 2019 we had raised around £70,000 and building started. The location of the Zayo access point for the backhaul was nearest to Capenhurst, so the network build started there.

A team of volunteers installed the cabinet at the village hall with the help of B4RN staff, and Will Dehany came to blow the fibre. Tea and sausage or bacon buns kept the volunteers going.

Crucially, in March 2019, the new Rural Gigabit Connectivity Scheme (RGC) was launched. The implications of this on our project, ultimately, would be profound. The eligibility rules were



The bacon booty queen.



Blowing the core fibre and they bring us tea.



Working a bit late.



Jon Randal-Paley and Bruce Alexander doing the bullet.



Neil in a rush to check something.



Neil and Bruce patching customers.

much simpler than the GBVS making applying and using them much more straightforward.

The original £70,000 went on funding the backhaul and the first part of the build. The remaining connections were voucher-funded and work continued in Capenhurst through Woodbank, Two Mills and Shotwick until the end of 2019.

B4RN staff came and blew the core fibre and fused the enclosures. They brought the first customers live on 17th December 2019. They worked late that day so nobody was missed out. Bruce and John fused the bullet, Will finished all the house blows. Neil patched in the first customer.



Yes, it's live.



Neil patching customers..



Elizabethan farmhouse.

An Elizabethan farmhouse with state of the art milking parlour was one of the business voucher connections.

The famous Pete Delaney spade was manufactured and used on lawn trenches.

The first customers installed were very happy with their new connections, and the plusnet routers were soon turned off.



The photo does not do it justice. Amazing property.



Happy kids can now do what their school friends can do.



The famous Pete Delaney spade. Patent pending.



Easy to trench house duct through a lawn with the PD spade.



The house fusers were well impressed by this house's network.



The first speed test on a laptop, Over 900 Mbps symmetrical.



Fleeting the core fibre.



Barry presenting at the public meeting.



A village meeting.



James Clapham fusing one of the bullets.



B4RN splicers fusing the house connections.



Volunteers reeling out the multiple ducts.



Volunteers reeling off the ducts.



Pop-up cafe.



The first B4RN cabinet for Capenhurst.



A chamber ready to blow.



The Puddington cabinet.



Pop-up cafe. Tea break.

So the first stage of the Cheshire Hub was done.

2019 was not so good for the remaining footprint covering Puddington, Burton and Ness, however.

B4RN installed a street cabinet in Puddington, arranged power to it, installed 3 road crossings and commissioned a contractor to start installing duct (all at B4RN's expense because of the delays) in anticipation of receiving funds from the voucher requests once connections started to be made.

Disaster strikes

At exactly the same time, the eligibility rules changed on the latest iteration of the gigabit voucher scheme. The commercial Openreach build meant Burton and Puddington were no longer eligible for voucher funding and Ness had been reclassified as urban.

This stopped the build in its tracks. Without the voucher funding we would have to raise a substantial sum of non-refundable money to replace it. This was a consequence of B4RN changing their funding model to rely largely on voucher income that doesn't need to be paid back compared to investment funding that does, eventually.

Over the next few months we tried to get something built. but in July 2022 we finally gave up as it became apparent that we stood little chance of raising the tens of thousands in additional funding required if Openreach were going to build anyway. This was despite B4RN kindly offering to allow investment funding instead of having to donate the money.

Sadly, we didn't get gigabit broadband and B4RN were out of pocket by tens of thousands for the work already done.



The team of volunteers at the Capenhurst cabinet.



The unused BT Openreach fibre.



Still on the pole unused since 2018.

Still, Openreach promised to be here soon enough. Or rather they wouldn't, except for 23 properties in the centre of the village.

The remaining 116 properties in Puddington wouldn't be built to by Openreach and B4RN couldn't build to them either because there were no vouchers.

Why has this absurd situation arisen? Openreach has denied they were ever going to build to them. This is despite putting fibre infrastructure on the poles right opposite my house, which remain there unused to this day.

There are two other poles with CBTs and fibre on them that remain unconnected within 50m of this pole.

Openreach has also installed a pole on private land 75m away and this remains unused with nothing installed on it.

Installation was all done in the same frenzy of van activity in December 2018 and January 2019.

I think the BT Openreach explanation (stated in the ISPReview article) that they never intended to build here is rather lame. If they didn't, then perhaps it was simply a mistake or, perhaps, a 'towels on deckchairs' exercise to make sure the vouchers went away at the cost of throwing up a few bits of infrastructure and a pole....

As a consequence, all 116 remaining properties went into the Project Gigabit regional procurement for Cheshire (Lot 17) making them ineligible for vouchers.

Freedom Fibre won the Lot 17 contract on 23rd May 2024 and spent the next few months in the planning stage. In February 2025, there seemed to be indications from Freedom Fibre that service

would be arriving a lot sooner than we expected, sometime in mid-2025 perhaps.

Then on 7th March 2025, Freedom Fibre dropped out of the Lot 17 contract entirely 'by mutual consent' leaving us, and the many thousands of others that would have benefitted across Cheshire, in limbo. No properties were connected under the contract.

The reason given was 'by mutual consent' (with BDUK) so exactly why this happened is conjecture. Here in Puddington, Openreach announced a commercial build on 22nd January 2025. There is a strong likelihood that this may have affected the public funding Freedom Fibre could have claimed to build here anyway; a point that is moot now that the whole contract has gone.

Whatever the reason(s), the reality is that we are now left waiting for Openreach to complete our build over 6 years after they started. As it stands, the Openreach website indicates this will be sometime between now and the end of 2026.

There is reason for optimism though.

We have decided to JFDI and build our own full fibre network. Materials and equipment have already been acquired and the 1.7km of backhaul we need is being constructed. This is happening regardless if Openreach turns up or not. We hope to have our first connections in the summer of 2025.

The B4RN spirit lives !

Conclusion

Yes, we had a lot of arguments with B4RN, tempers were lost, and delays did happen, but this sort of thing occurs on projects. However, progress was being made and both B4RN and ourselves had every reason to expect the Puddington build would happen.

Unfortunately, either Openreach or BDUK or both, whether accidentally or not, put paid to that. I should point out there was a separate B4RN project, the FiveVillages project, based in nearby Mollington. This started not long after us using the same backhaul. Sadly this closed in January 2022 without anything being built. I don't know the full reasons for this but across our project and theirs there were around 2000 properties.

In the end, fewer than 100 properties were actually connected. The limited success, in my opinion, was largely due to the change in funding model.

Fully investment funded was simple to understand - raise enough money and you can build. We were happy with that, and personally, I wished it had stayed that way. Government funding, in the form of vouchers, helped B4RN expand, but like all government money, comes with strings, bureaucracy and rules that constantly change. The control this took away from our project ultimately proved fatal.

Even B4RN faced a crisis in 2021 when BDUK announced that the Lancashire regional procurement

meant all vouchers were frozen. It took a lot of effort to resolve this with what became Voucher Priority Areas (VPA).

B4RN has been hugely successful in delivering truly ‘outside in’ broadband to rural areas and continues to be so. It is a truly fantastic achievement and an ongoing success story.

It’s just a pity something as capricious as voucher availability now drives expansion.



Pete and Dot Delaney at a showtell day at Melling.

Capenhurst laid over 12 kilometres of trench with 30k left unfinished for the rest of the project.

We started this chapter with ISPReview, so in 2025 we will end with it.

The digitalbritain superfarcе rocks on.

<https://www.ispreview.co.uk/index.php/2025/03/freedom-fibre-drops-out-of-project-gigabit-broadband-contract-for-cheshire-uk.html>