



# Broadway Partners

How an altnet works

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

**Broadband Journal talked to Reece Simmons of Broadway Partners, who have recently announced their planned Fibre to the Premises roll out.**

The last two years has been characterised by one triumphant rural fibre roll out after another. Innovation, funding grants, awards and glory, the trade press has been thrumming with the rise and rise of altnets all over the UK, whose collective vision have seen one remote outpost connected after another. In just a few years they have become serious players wielding significant power and are to be congratulated for spotting an opportunity and exploiting it so effectively.

But what of the communities themselves? Who is involved? What is the process and what are the (presumably sizable) obstacles? Broadband Journal talked to Reece Simmons of Broadway Partners, who have recently announced their planned Fibre to the Premises roll out in stunning Aberedw (population 229) and Glaschw (551) in rural Powys, South Wales, close to Builth Wells and Hay-on-Wye.

By an unearthly coincidence Roger Blakeway, the SCTE's former CEO and industry veteran happens to live in a tiny hamlet in the area, and over a cup of tea Reece told us about his plans and what they have achieved so far.

## **Who are Broadway Partners? What's the background and experience in rural broadband?**

Broadway Partners is an altnet and got started in 2016, so originally, we were working in wireless. The industry has

moved towards fibre quite quickly. Basically, we're looking to do some broadband pilot projects and learn from those. So, when a tender was put out late summer, early autumn of 2020, Broadway Partners tendered for that project and were successful.

## **Then what happened?**

Everyone in Aberedw and Glaschw was contacted by Powys County Council and asked to register their interest. Broadway did a full presentation on each village and the areas that had poor connectivity on a larger scale, because we knew that the project could have a better impact there compared to an area where there was a large amount of Fibre to the Cabinet, or a large mix of Fibre to the Premises, for example.

## **How receptive were the local residents?**

The key link for any of these projects is an engaged community. This is a challenge because no one knows these altnets really. People are very brand-loyal; we trust the big brands, the BTs, the Sky's, because they've spent time building that brand for us to trust. So, when a new player comes to the market, it's a case of, "No, I don't know them, so we won't show any interest." So, getting the word out about what these projects are and how they work is very important.

***What's the procedure for applying and getting that government grant, and what proportion of build or implementation cost does that grant cover?***

We've got a project group which can be made up of community council, town council, members of the community, county council, and we try and get everyone engaged, because they're all really important to the success of a project in each area. Then we plan the marketing and engagement; a Facebook page, presentations at the local village hall and we always do a mail out to every single property and the community group helps write the letter. Then we watch the registrations of interest come back. So, rule of thumb, for a rural area like Aberedw and Glascwm, we'd try and look for 30% roughly in terms of properties registering their interest.

***Why so low? I would have thought everyone would be up for this.***

Many people think they already have super-fast fibre because Fibre to the Cabinet has been marketed as super-fast fibre; they don't realise that they've still got the old copper line to the house. So, there's a lack of understanding there. As part of the PSTN switchover, they're talking about it more as a SOGEA, the Single Order General Ethernet Access, which is great. It doesn't say what it is, but actually, it's not Fibre to the Home because it's not all fibre, so it allows a level of distinguishing between the two. That's one reason. Then there are those that have been given false promises in the past by other broadband providers, and it's never happened. So they don't want to waste their time. And there are always a few who are very proud and say, "I don't want broadband. I've got my landline. I'm very happy. I don't even own a mobile phone." Lots of reasons.

***What happens once you get sufficient interest?***

Our application goes to DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) along with a business plan indicating our intention to connect every single property in the area. Once the funding's approved, the grant doesn't get paid until the connections are completed. So, all the money that's put into

build, marketing, everything all comes from the altnet that's completing that project, who get paid at the very end. DCMS have even been known to send out a representative to go and test the speeds before they issue vouchers.

***Does the voucher money cover the costs?***

Some areas, yes, and some areas, no. In Aberedw and Glascwm, I'm not 100% sure if the vouchers currently cover the whole planned build, but I believe it's quite close. We're not allowed to make a profit off the vouchers. It has to cover the cost at best, and potentially leave a gap. So, for out-laying Llansantffraed-in-Elwel, there is a financial gap of a few hundred pounds. The vouchers don't cover it, so we'll be putting in our own money to complete that network. There is a Top Up grant system in Wales that also provides help connecting rural communities as well; if you receive speeds of less than 30 megabits per second, they'll top that up, as in Roger's case, it provides £3,000 per residential property, or £7,000 per business property. It's been a game-changer in these rural areas.

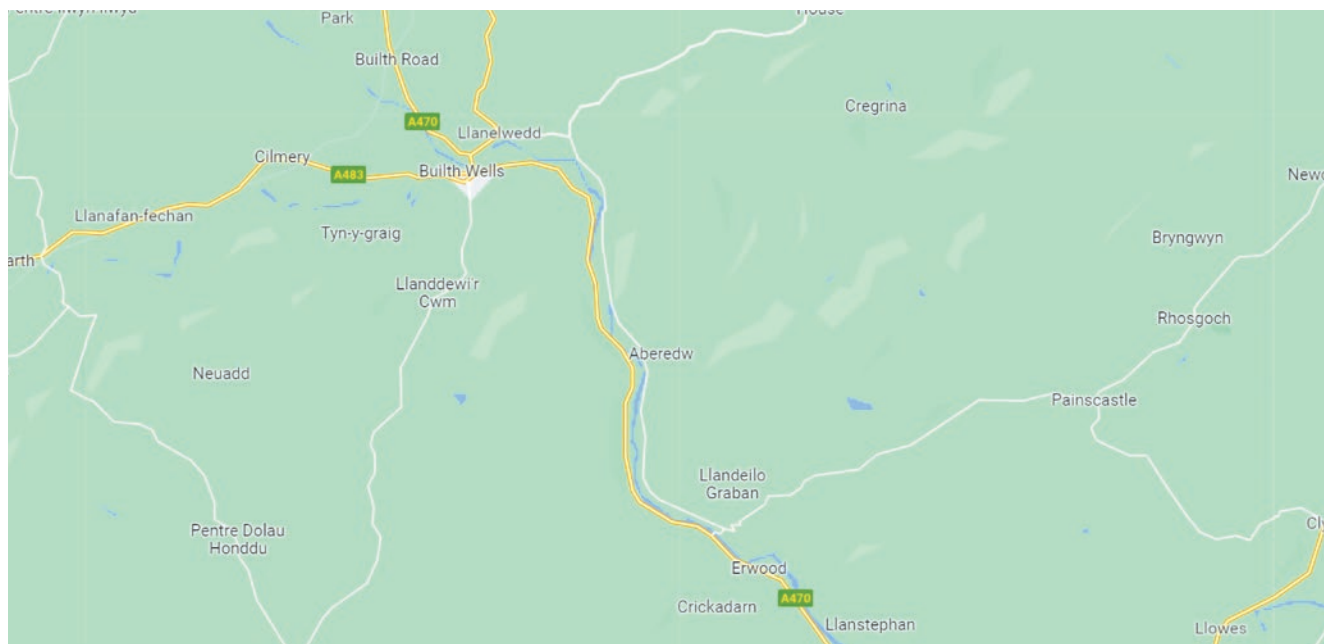
***Then surveys take place presumably.***

Yes, we do both cabinet surveys as well as the whole local Openreach network. Because we have PIA, the physical infrastructure access and agreement with Openreach, we use all the Openreach poles and ducts. We also build our own network where needed. We use their poles and ducts, and run our own fibre from the exchange along those, but we're not going to run fibre on poles that are hanging in trees and hedges, which is very common in rural Powys and rural Wales. Those trees and hedges, in many occasions, actually ARE the pole; the pole is just decorative. Not ideal.

***How are you liaising with local residents?***

We mail out regular updates every two months and regular Facebook posts. Also, we have found open community Zoom calls very productive. It's usually chaired by the county council and Broadway would do a presentation and field questions. We have found that people who would never usually speak

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up do raise their hand in a Zoom environment. If you go to a hall, it's usually the same three people that stand up and hog the time.

### ***How will you be providing service option to all existing BT broadband customers, including remote farms, et cetera?***

When we work out our business plan, we work out connecting that farm at the very end. The very clever thing about the U.K. gigabit voucher scheme is that if your property receives less than 100 megabits per second, the U.K. government, pays £1,500 per residential property and £3,500 per business property. The cost-per-homes-past may be well below that in a village and balances the additional cost for outlying farms etc.

### ***Do you find that residents who had initially said no then go onto change their mind as they see the progress?***

Yes. You get a wave of signups. You'll get those naysayers that say it'll never happen, but suddenly, they see a Broadway man in the village with a Broadway jacket on that's surveying the poles, and they think, "Oh, this IS going to happen. I think it's worth registering my interest." A lot of others are persuaded by the Principle of Social Proof; their neighbours are happy, so they take the plunge.

### ***What's the price of this service?***

Our entry level is £19.99 per month, including VAT, for 100 megabits per second. Or for £39.99 you can have 300 megabits per second down your fibre line, and you can also have your landline over VoIP, as well.

Reece bubbled over with excitement relating all of this to us and his enthusiasm was infectious. Roger and I felt sure that even given the challenges facing the roll out in an area so rural, Reece and his team will make it happen. We will touch base with him – and Roger – again and see how that connection is working out.

