

Draft until signed

Minutes of Battisford Parish Council Public Meeting

Thursday 19 September 2013 at 7.00pm, Battisford Village Hall, Straight Road, Battisford

Present: Mr C. Knock, Chair of Parish Council; Mrs S. Zethraeus, Parish Councillor; Mr B. Rhodes, Parish Councillor; Mrs A. Hand, Parish Councillor; District Councillor Godden; County Councillor Truelove (arrived late); Jonathan Chown, Business Development Specialist, Suffolk County Council; Peter Ingram, Programme Director, Suffolk County Council; Mark Bee, Leader, Suffolk County Council, (arrived late); David Ruffley, M.P. (arrived late); Reporter from the East Anglian Daily Times; Mrs H. Andrade, Clerk; approx. 80 members of the public.

1. Welcome & Purpose of the Meeting – Parish Council Chairman

Cllr Knock welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the purpose of the meeting.

2. Introductory Remarks – Mark Bee, Leader, Suffolk County Council

Mark Bee arrived later during the meeting, so this part of the meeting didn't take place, Peter Ingram gave his presentation.

3. Presentation on the Suffolk Better Broadband Programme process and latest progress – Peter Ingram, Programme Director

Peter Ingram gave a background to the current situation and what Suffolk County Council aimed to do to make it better. Suffolk County Council had received funding to provide Superfast Broadband to Suffolk, but unfortunately was only able to develop areas that weren't already in BT's coverage areas for improvement. Battisford was in a BT area and therefore it was up to BT to improve coverage in the village and Suffolk County Council, by law was unable to work there.

Peter Ingram identified where the two cabinets were that served Battisford, one of which (Combs) had already been upgraded by BT and the other, in Barking, was due to be upgraded by Suffolk County Council, but because of the distance from the cabinets these were of little help to Battisford.

There were two possible solutions; the installation of new cabinets, or NGA Amplifiers off of existing cabinets to extend the coverage area. The issue was funding. BT had intended to improve all of the areas that they said they would cover, but it hadn't been economically feasible for them to achieve this. BT and the Government now have to come to agreement together on how this problem will be solved. Suffolk County Council were asked why they couldn't install a new cabinet in Battisford themselves, Peter Ingram replied that this wasn't possible, because BT had threatened to sue them, if they intervened in any areas that BT had claimed as theirs.

Two options had been identified; option one is to hold BT to their original submission, but nothing exists to compel BT to do this. Peter Ingram reported that action had been taken, BT had been questioned. He said that lots of pressure had been put on BT to extend coverage in their areas.

Option two is to get areas like Battsford moved out of BT Commercial Deployment areas and into Suffolk County Council's intervention area. BT Commercial Deployment is due to complete by spring 2014 and Suffolk County Council would like to go through another consultation after this period to achieve this. Unfortunately the intervention area is already bigger than the money available so Suffolk County Council had gone back to Government to ask for more funding.

When BT's Commercial Coverage programme comes to an end in spring 2014, Suffolk County Council will then ask for approval from the Government to go through another State Aid Consultancy Process. Suffolk County Council has already been involved in active discussions with the Government and BT to get this process started.

In addition the National Audit Office had identified that the funding the Government had provided in 2011 had been insufficient to cover rural areas to meet Superfast Broadband targets, only 85% of the 90% had been achieved. Additional funding to cover this 5% had been applied for.

Cllr Knock explained that Battsford also had issues with telephone lines and infrastructure and that the village needed BT to solve the landline issue.

Mark Bee, Leader of Suffolk County Council, who had arrived by this point, explained that Suffolk County Council would only be able to help from a political aspect with telephony, but they would do what they could to help.

Mark Bee also went on to explain how disappointed he and Suffolk County Council were with BT's approach and how frustrating it was that they hadn't even attended this meeting. Regular meetings were held between BT and Suffolk County Council. Suffolk County Council was continuing to pressure BT into providing the service that they said they would provide.

4. Questions & Discussion

A lengthy question and discussion session followed in which members of the public were able to ask Suffolk County Council about the previous decisions they had made and the way forward.

Firstly the representatives from Suffolk County Council were asked what they understood by the BT Commercial Footprint and if they believed that BT would successfully cover all postcode areas. Peter Ingram explained that Suffolk County Council had been legally obliged to consult with BT and Virgin Media as to the extent of their existing and planned coverage. BT responded by giving Suffolk County Council a list of areas where it didn't intend to develop.

Peter Ingram claimed that Suffolk County Council were sceptical about BT's promises during the consultation stage and entered into heavy dialogue with them at that time.

The Representatives were then asked why they didn't question BT's ability to cover all the areas they said they would, before they signed the contract. Peter Ingram replied that unfortunately in the end BT was the only contender for the contract, as Fujitsu dropped out. As BT was the only contender, Suffolk County Council felt that

they had to accept their promises, and told BT that they would hold them to it. Peter Ingram and Mark Bee stated that Suffolk County Council are continuing to pressure BT and are holding six weekly meetings with them.

When asked if there was any way that BT could be held accountable, Mark Bee confirmed that this was not possible. Prior to signing the contract with BT, Suffolk County Council realised that the contract wasn't enforceable and had reported the situation to Central Government to make them aware of the risk.

It was agreed that a second consultancy was a sensible route to follow and this needed to be done as soon as possible, to ensure that Suffolk County Council were given permission to intervene in non-intervention areas and to secure funding.

David Ruffley requested that Suffolk County Council confirm deadlines so they could be held to these deadlines.

Peter Ingram replied that the process had already begun, the absolute deadline for funding was June 2014, Suffolk County Council would need to know that funding would be available by December 2013.

When asked if Suffolk County Council would use BT again if they secured further Government funds, they replied yes, as finding another provider would mean having to go through another formal consultation, which would take up to two years to complete.

Ben Skinner from the Battsford Communications Group asked why Suffolk County Council wouldn't consider opening up to alternative vendors or using multiple technologies to achieve their targets. Suffolk County Council responded again that if they went through another supplier they would have to go through another procurement process which could take another 2-3 years. No provision would be made for wireless, as the agreements only allowed for the provision of broadband, it is not possible to stipulate how the technology would be delivered.

Esther Jewson enquired if Suffolk County Council could make a commitment to Battsford that if further funding was secured, it would be spent in Battsford. Peter Ingram responded that yes, he would like to make that promise, but was unable to say where funding would be spent without first securing the funding. David Ruffley then asked who makes the decision as to where the money goes. Peter Ingram explained that the State Aid Consultation process would cover all areas like Battsford. The Implementation Board and Better Broadband for Suffolk Board both see Battsford as a high priority for extra funding.

A question was asked about the opportunity to take BT to OFFCOM, Mark Bee explained that although the 'heat needed to be turned up against BT' he was reluctant to do so at this point, as it could hold up the decision making process that was already underway. However, he did say that he would do everything he possibly could to get Chief Executive of BT either to attend or to get him to ask Bill Murphy to attend a meeting with Battsford, so that he would have a better idea of how things were in the village. He explained that Annette Thorpe was not in a high enough position at BT to enforce any action for Battsford.

Mark Bee also suggested that it would be a good idea for other areas that were affected in the same way as Battisford to get together and put pressure on BT as well.

David Ruffley said that at least the threat of OFFCOM should be made now, in the hope that BT would get moving.

Councillor Hand asked if there were any areas in the BT Commercial Footprint that had already been moved into the Suffolk County Council bid. Suffolk County Council replied that there were none.

The question and discussion session ended by David Ruffley stating that he, Mark Bee and Peter Ingram would confirm what their individual action points would be from this meeting and what Battisford should do as a community.

5. AOB/Next Steps

Peter Ingram – would continue to pressure BT. He would continue to pursue the strategy for another State Aid Consultation to re-consult on the area and move BT trouble spot areas into Suffolk County Council areas and apply for extra funding for these areas. He needs to ensure that that funding is agreed by December.

Mark Bee would also continue to put pressure on BT. He would find out the full scope of the BT problem areas, and as soon as this was done he would hold a meeting for representatives from all problem areas to meet with Bill Murphy of BT. A message would be put on the Suffolk County Council website requesting information from all people living in problem areas. EADT would also be asked to put the message out and request people tell them where the problem areas were. As soon as the full scope of the problem was known, funding could be asked for. He would ask for a map depicting BT and Suffolk County Council zones to be put in the EADT too. Mark Bee also said that he would speak to BT about telephone coverage in Battisford. Finally he would write another letter on behalf of Suffolk County Council and David Ruffley to the Secretary of State re-enforcing the application

David Ruffley said he would meet with Ed Vaizey, Minister responsible for Broadband roll out in UK and explain to him the situation. He would publicise the trouble spots in Suffolk particularly Battisford and Haughley Green which were in his constituency. He would ask all Suffolk MPs to publicise the issue on their websites and ask them to write to the media. He would also investigate OFFCOM and how much of a threat it would be to BT. He would write to Chief Executive of BT reflecting the meeting today, re-enforcing what Mark Bee is doing, to get a meeting with Bill Murphy.

Parish Councillor Hand asked David Ruffley if he had handed the parish council letter to Richard Benyon. David Ruffley replied that yes, he had handed it to him, but not to rely on it as it was a very small fund. He said that this Action Plan summed up the way forward.

Mark Bee thanked David Ruffley for attending and thanked Battisford for inviting him to attend and the meeting had provided useful ammunition for use against BT,

he looked forward to meeting again, hopefully to unveil a new 'Green Box' in the village.

County Councillor Truelove thanked Battisford Parish Council for what they had done so far, this was the start of what would happen for the benefit of Battisford and Suffolk.

The meeting closed at 9.30pm.