

High-speed future is well worth the wait

IN AUGUST last year I wrote about the partial broadband revolution that was taking place in Milton Keynes and about how hundreds of BT OpenReach vans had been drafted in from far and wide to lay fibre optic cables to the underground boxes outside businesses and homes connected to the Bradwell Abbey exchange. This system is called Fibre To The Premises, where the glass cable runs all the way to your premises and can deliver a guaranteed download minimum speed of 100Mbps.

There have been developments aplenty since then, some good, some bad. My own experience perhaps illustrates this well.

I live within the area served by Bradwell Abbey but since my home is more than five miles from the exchange, the best I could hope for from the old copper cables was about half a megabyte per second. So having spotted cable-layers putting the empty fibre optic cables (they blow the fibre through when you order a line) right outside my front door and cutting off both my landline and my Sky-Box-supplementing Virgin TV service for several days at the same time, on October 22 I booked my place on the BT trial via BT-owned Plusnet.

Dave Tomlinson, the head of the trial at Plusnet, told me that the company had had 29 applications for the trial and I was customer number 30. He and I were hopeful that within days I would be enjoying lightning-fast downloads and uploads, fast enough to make internet-enabled TV a realistic home option.

Little did I realise the further problems that would ensue. It seems that

several estates and villages within Milton Keynes, including mine, have the telephone ducting 'looped' from the boxes outside in the road. This means that instead of each home having dedicated ducting from the boxes in the ground, the telephone cables go to house one, from there to house two and so on. This means that they cannot simply push through empty sheaths before blowing cable: they need to dig up your drive, or even the road in order to cross it - a very expensive option.

To cut a very long story short, because the below-ground box was only about 27 feet from my house, they eventually agreed to dig up my gravel drive, and I finally achieved FTTP on February 14 this year, some four months and several hundred phone calls and e-mails after ordering it.

Upload

However, the wait was worth it. It is truly fantastic. An example: a very large file I attempted to upload to a third party from the office took more than three frustrating hours. I then, apparently, did something wrong and somehow it deleted itself at the far end. No problem. I simply waited until I was home and did the exact same upload from there and the three hour-plus upload shrank to fewer than six minutes. A download of a full HD Top Gear programme from BBC iPlayer took seven seconds... Wow!

But what of the rest of the city and my own business premises on the Milton Keynes exchange? Pressure group MK Broadband Action Group

www.mkbag.org has had some success in lobbying for high-quality internet access to the whole of Milton Keynes. Apart from OpenReach's Bradwell Abbey FTTP trial, BT has developed the cheaper-to-install Fibre To The Cabinet system, which most will know as BT Infinity. This involves fibre optic cable to the above-ground green boxes and then existing copper cable for the 'last mile'.

Political

This is now rolling out across the majority of local exchanges including Milton Keynes, Wolverton, Emerson Valley and Old Stratford. It exists already in Newport Pagnell. While not as fast as FTTP, it offers speeds up to 40Mb/sec and should be sufficient to keep Milton Keynes a competitive city for the foreseeable future. Most would therefore suppose that this means the job is almost done. But no.

FTTC is not being rolled out to the other 22,000 lines on Bradwell Abbey exchange, nor into areas such as Great Linford nor to anyone on the Woburn Sands exchange - the whole of Wavendon Gate, parts of Walnut Tree and Old Farm Park.

But what of alternatives? Was Milton Keynes' TV cabling not 'future proof'? Well, no and the lesson is never to believe in that oft-quoted phrase. The old copper TV cables cannot carry high-speed broadband nor even decent HD TV.

This writer understands that pressure has been put on Milton Keynes Council to finance the upgrade of the TV net-

Theo Chalmers



work, now only used by 11,000 subscribers. But due to its unique form of ownership, split between BT - which owns it - and its operator Virgin Media, it has become a political hot potato.

I understand that the council has refused to finance the upgrade from public funds; BT does not want the competition to its FTTP or FTTC systems and Virgin cannot upgrade it as it does not own the ducting nor has the right to interfere with it. Sadly, as it physically serves only around 65 per cent of homes in Milton Keynes anyway, it is probably doomed.

If you would like to experience 21st-century broadband for your home or business and wish to know which exchange serves your address, visit www.samknows.com/broadband/exchange_search and enter your telephone number.

If you decide to call Plusnet (0845 140 0200), please give Dave Tomlinson my regards. He *did* finally go the full nine yards for me, after all. Cheerio.

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WAVENDON MILTON KEYNES

Renewable heating: time to take the initiative

OUR series of articles on renewable energy have debunked some of the myths around renewable energy and talked about how you can use solar PV panels and wind turbines to generate electricity for use in your home, school or business. We have also explained how the government's Feed-in Tariff Scheme provides a guaranteed return on investment for individuals and organisations investing in renewable schemes to generate electricity.

In Milton Keynes, indeed across the UK, we spend a large chunk of energy on heating our homes and generating hot water for bathing and washing. The good news is that the government is looking to replicate the Feed-in Tariff Scheme for renewable technology to generate heat for heating hot water, and running central heating. The plans

are due to come into force next year after trials later this year and the scheme's details are being reviewed. However, the spending review in October confirmed that £860 million will be used to fund the scheme.

The RHI is the first of its kind in the world and will be backdated to include equipment installed after July 15 2009. Its first phase will be targeted at providing long-term tariff support for non-domestic sectors, which contribute 38 per cent of the UK's carbon emissions.

Ministers plan to seek Parliamentary approval of the regulations in July and will introduce the tariff scheme thereafter. The basic principles of the scheme look likely to be the same as those for FITS:

- Payments for energy generated using renewable technology;

- Guaranteed long-term returns;
- Index-linked payments to guard against inflation;
- Tax-free income to make renewable energy one of the best investment opportunities;
- Eligibility will be dependent on buying products that are Microgeneration Certification Scheme-registered and having them installed by a MCS-registered installer.

There are three main technologies used for generating heat and hot water. We will discuss each in more detail in future articles but in brief they are:

Solar thermal Similar to the solar PV panels used to generate electricity, solar thermal panels are installed on the roof to capture the heat of the sun which heats a liquid. This is then

pumped through your hot water cylinder to heat the water.

Heat pumps A range of heat pumps are available which take their heat from either the ground, with pipes installed either horizontally or vertically, or from the air.

Biomass boilers Like a traditional boiler except fuelled by wood, usually specially-made wood pellets. Biomass boilers are ideal for colder houses and, because they use fuel from sustainable forests, are carbon neutral.

As with any renewable technology, it is vital to seek expert advice when deciding which technology will suit your home, business or organisation. However, almost any property can benefit from the 'free' energy available and the RHI tariffs soon to be on offer.

BritishEco designs and installs a comprehensive range of micro-renewable energy solutions. Our local office, near to Central Milton Keynes, is run by Justin Canning. T: 01908 760920 E: justin.canning@britisheco.com

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● British Eco was established in 2002 and is a National Renewable Energy installer. Our Milton Keynes office is based near Wavendon.