

Berkshire's superfast broadband coverage

I have received this news release from West Berkshire Council regarding Berkshire superfast broadband coverage:

Superfast Berkshire, a multi-million pound programme to deliver access to high speed broadband throughout Berkshire has entered its final phase.

The programme initiative was started in 2011, under the umbrella of the Government's (Broadband Delivery UK) national programme, set out to deliver superfast broadband to areas not serviced by the commercial plans of the private sector. Over the past five years the programme has driven superfast broadband coverage across the county from 87% to 95% under Phases 1 & 2. Contracts have just been awarded to BT and Gigaclear under a third phase which is now under way and will see superfast coverage extended to more than 99.5% over the next 2 years. This will make Berkshire one of the best served counties for superfast broadband across the UK, benefiting residents and businesses alike.

Contracts for the third phase have been signed with BT to extend coverage to 7,400 urban premises and Gigaclear to extend coverage to 6,100 rural premises. Not only is this good news at a county level, each of the 6 Berkshire districts will also achieve coverage of over 99%, providing much more equitable access for all areas of the county, a key objective of the phase 3 procurement. However, the work doesn't stop there as Superfast Berkshire working with BT, Gigaclear and other suppliers under their commercial plans strive to hit the magic 100% target of total coverage for Berkshire.

In total more than £40m will have been invested in the Superfast Berkshire programme by both the private and public sector to deliver superfast broadband. This includes around £29.3m from partners BT, Gigaclear and Call Flow Solutions, £5.5m from Berkshire local authorities & Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership and £5.2m from national government (BDUK).

Superfast Berkshire has also actively engaged with broadband market providers since the start of the programme to encourage expansion of their commercial plans, allowing public sector funds to be used where they are most needed. This has also given consumers more choice where superfast provision already existed or overlaps.

Berkshire has seen the demand for faster and faster broadband speeds with more and more businesses, people working from home and normal family activity all with increasing numbers of applications relying on fast internet access. Take-up of superfast broadband products delivered under phase one has risen to over 47% so far (the third highest across the UK) and take-up under phase two is also starting to climb.

What the German car industry wants

I read that some in the German car industry think a long transition for the UK leaving is a good idea. This is presumably because they don't fancy 10% tariffs on their large exports to the UK.

I gave good news for them. The UK is happy to offer them continued tariff free as part of a clean Brexit in March 2019. Were we to leave under WTO rules the German industry would of course still have its excellent factories in the UK. It would need them even more as it could make product for the UK market tariff free here in the UK, and would be most welcome to do so.

Energy use by the public sector

Many people in the public sector are much exercised by climate change ideas. I myself am all in favour of energy efficiency and cutting fuel bills without cutting standards of heating and lighting. The public sector could do much more to offer a lead in these matters.

Highways authorities squander a lot of power on traffic light sets that could be replaced with roundabouts, and on all night street lights in places where they could be safely switched off at midnight owing to a lack of pedestrians after that time. Railway companies keep train engines running for long periods when parked at terminus stations awaiting turnround and scheduled departure. Most trains keep their engines running when stopped at red lights or in intermediate stations. Buses too often keep engines running in stationary traffic, at traffic lights and at bus stops. Most lack the switch off switch on technology enjoyed by many modern cars. Trains and buses are often far too large and heavy for the passenger numbers and route they are travelling, worsening the fuel per passenger figures.

Public sector building managers often keep lights on when outdoors light is sufficient to light the rooms. I remember attending a big conference on overuse of energy in a large room with huge candelabras with many bulbs on, all blazing when the sun was pouring in through all the windows. I was the only one to suggest we find a light switch. There are not enough movement sensors and other controls on the public estate to cut the bills.

Ministers could initiate more studies of energy use by building and function, and see what divergencies there are. Some of the investments needed to cut consumption are low cost with high pay off. Lagging of tanks and pipes, stopping drafts, putting in better controls and installing more efficient

boilers may all have good payoffs.

The EU tries to strengthen a weak hand

The EU wants more of our money. It wants to send us more of its unemployed. It wants to continue its huge trade surplus. All this puts it in a weak position as we leave.

So it invents silly ideas. It says the ECJ will continue ruling us after we have gone. This does not apply to any other independent country and should not apply to us. No need to pay to remove it!

It says it will stop UK citizens legally settled in one EU country moving to another after we have left. Fine. We cant stop them doing that if they want to. I doubt UK pensioners who have bought villas in Spain or Portugal will want to move to Poland or Germany anyway. Again, no need to pay for that.

They would be foolish to demand we pay to export to them, as that would be illegal under WTO rules. The only legal way to pay to trade is recognised tariffs, where their exports would then gift us a £12 bn tariff revenue to give back as tax cuts.

The estate we are now in – public sector land and buildings

The public sector has collected much land and many buildings over the years. Managing this well can provide better conditions for employees and better results for taxpayers.

I am not one who thinks we should sell off our core estate, or go in for expensive financing through sales and leasebacks. I was critical of Gordon Brown doing some of this. It is cheapest and best to own the freehold of the core estate, and to take direct responsibility for the maintenance and replacement of the buildings on the core estate. The UK government still has crucial sites with heritage buildings in Central London and elsewhere. Most Councils have good central sites, some with heritage buildings. Lets use them and look after them in the public sector.

In central London the Foreign Office, Downing Street, the Treasury, Parliament, the Scottish and Welsh Offices, the Banqueting Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Conference centre are all important sites and heritage buildings of

varying ages. Keeping a strong central estate around the palaces of Westminster and Whitehall makes sense. Beyond the historic core it is good to have some other sites close to the action. The buildings for departments like Education, Business, Culture Media and Sport, Transport and the Home Office do not have the same architectural and historical significance as the heritage buildings. Some of this space may become surplus to overall Whitehall requirements, and some of the properties where the state is freeholder may be suitable for substantial redevelopment. Sub letting to other users in some cases may be a good source of revenue whilst keeping land holdings that could be useful. The further from the core, the better the case for disposal of surplus accommodation.

Beyond central London there are huge MOD holdings. There is some move away from the most valuable areas. In my own constituency the army has moved out from its large Arborfield base so that can be sold for the taxpayers and transformed into private housing. There needs to be suitable forces housing supplied elsewhere. I continue to campaign for a home base approach for all three services where single or family accommodation is provided for service personnel at a constant place where their children can go to school and their loved ones can live or be nearby without constant change.

There is some movement down in total numbers of public service employees, as various services come to rely more on computing power. This over time frees space for disposal or re letting. As a general policy aim those officials who need regular and easy access to Ministers should come to live on the heritage estate near to Parliament. Major centres of public sector employment should be away from highly stressed and expensive parts of the country. As more comes to be done on line so there will be more scope to streamline local offices, and to create more one stop shops incorporating more than one government function or department.

The government is going over to a system of centrally managed estates with rental charges to departments for use whether the state is paying rent to a third party or owns the building. This should inject more discipline into property use, and could also lead to a demand for higher standards of services and interior fitment from client departments. This would be good for morale.