

Fibre force

Full fibre projects continue to pick up speed, despite a year of turmoil. **Comms Business** looks at where we are in the transition from FTTC to FTTP, and what comes next

There have been some ambitious targets for infrastructure providers to ensure the UK becomes a super connected powerhouse. In an unpredictable world, are there any obstacles in the way? Graham Wilkinson, head of sales at Beyond Connectivity doesn't believe the rollout was impacted too greatly by this year's pandemic. He said, "Although we had a full lockdown back in March, once this was lifted and the fact that telecoms [employees] were classed as essential key workers, then outdoor work certainly was put back on.

"I would say worst case the rollout plan had a three month delay. However, as there is plenty of competition to roll out the fibre network, rather than just two or three tier 1 carriers, then this gap can be filled and I believe will be by mid-2021. Competition is high so this will drive companies to catch up



Graham Wilkinson, Beyond Connectivity

and try and get ahead."

This contrasts with the view of Steven Potts, head of procurement, Colt Technology Services. He said the fibre rollout has been significantly impacted and delayed due to government lockdown restrictions. "There were important steps to take in order to ensure safe working environments for construction and fibre crews, as well as considering the impact of employees being unwell or having to self-isolate. Such protocols can effect the entire chain from ordering to planning, as well as the street works teams. As offices had closed, access also became an issue, and at the peak of lockdown restrictions only essential works related to critical infrastructure or repair were being performed."

David Rowark, head of B2B at Freesat is upbeat about the future. "If anything, Covid-19 has created a surge in demand for fibre broadband services. It has made consumers more aware of the weakness in their current broadband package because of the increased amount of time that has been spent using networks for work, entertainment and shopping in lockdown. As a result, this has encouraged consumers to improve and increase both the speed and service to their homes."

Graeme Oxby, CEO of

Community Fibre, added, "In view of the evolving work environment with businesses adopting a mix of remote and office-based approaches, it is proven that a broadband network that is stable, fast, with symmetrical upload and download speeds, regardless of location is crucial. It is more important than ever for our customers to access a quality office and/or home broadband as well as Wi-Fi connections that can simultaneously handle video conferencing, cloud applications, online payment systems and more."

Andy Wilson, head of wholesale, CityFibre, said, "Right from the start, we felt it was vitally important that we could continue to advance our plans. By the time the lockdown came, we'd already done the necessary checks and made sure that we could continue to go full speed ahead with our roll-out. Our teams were designated as key workers and were able to carry on building out to plan, while following all the necessary safety guidelines.

"That's proved to be invaluable, as it now looks like the pandemic will continue to have an impact for an extended period. We did encounter a couple of temporary restrictions that were imposed by some local authorities during the initial lockdown period, but we've overcome those. In that respect, it's been business as usual. We



Graeme Oxby, Community Fibre

have been turning 'no' into 'yes' and replacing negativity and inaction with positivity and real action ever since we started building our network. Making it happen is part of our DNA. And it's vital that we keep advancing and progressing with our roll-out – to provide a return for our investors and give the UK the full fibre network it needs to compete post-Brexit and in the midst of the ongoing crisis. Full fibre is not a luxury or a nice-to-have now for the UK – it's essential. We need to get there as fast as we can."

John Tarleton, director of business development for Europe at IQGeo, said that the pandemic has inevitably slowed fibre rollout as a result of various factors, ranging from restricted access to installation sites to the knock-on effects of disruption to connected supply chains and industries. "However, in the UK for example, it is my perception

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“We have been turning ‘no’ into ‘yes’ and replacing negativity and inaction with positivity and real action ever since we started building our network. Making it happen is part of our DNA.”

Andy Wilson, head of wholesale, CityFibre

that telecoms workers have been viewed largely as ‘key workers’, which has kept initial disruption to a minimum and ensured that a significant proportion of projects have thus far been carried out without major interruption.”

A changing world

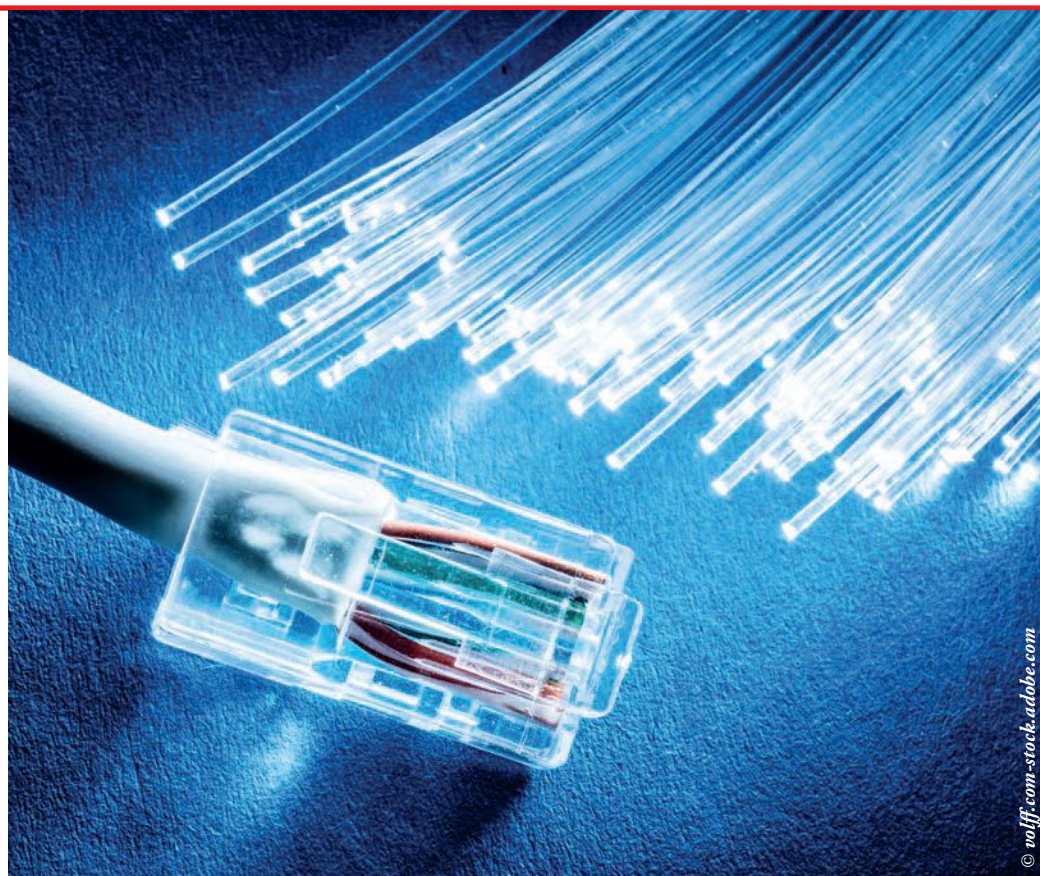
Wilkinson thinks the world of work is changing. “I have seen a lot of companies welcome WFH strategies and confirm they are going to reduce or close offices. However, I have also seen companies holding out to see what happens next year. Overall I believe there will be more emphasis on WFH with an option to split between this and office presence. Certainly the use of tools like teams and Zoom have completely changed the way we interact as we look at how interactions with customers and suppliers has changed and is changing.

Potts also feels change is happening. “We think the role of the office will change and the workforce will transition to being more distributed, with increased flexibility. This will happen alongside the accelerating move to the cloud and digitisation for companies’ systems and workflows.”

“Connections to key data centre locations – the onramps to consuming cloud services – are increasing, and with more applications with cloud-based offerings, greater numbers of these new virtual endpoints are required.”

Rowark said providers have had to tilt their strategies. “This reflects their focus away from business premises to more of a residential focus, in addition to some providers prioritising larger cities and towns for full fibre connections to the home - as there’s a clear demand from consumers there who are previously used to high speeds. This combined with discounts on Fibre to the Home (FTTH) offerings has seen a surge in demand.

“To counter that, more



rural AltNet fibre providers, which received big government investment at the beginning of the year, are seeing a surge in home connections from people who previously commuted into a workplace office environment, which already had high connectivity speeds. This, to some extent, has caused a shift from larger ISPs to more rural providers which have a dedicated full fibre offer for those in rural communities.”

Wilson, from CityFibre, said while no-one really knows for sure what ‘normal’ will look like when we can finally move and work without restrictions once more. One thing is certain – the need for full fibre will be even more urgent and critical to the success of businesses, individuals and the UK economy as a whole. “For now, our strategy has not changed, and we believe there will be an even bigger opportunity for CityFibre and its partners going forward.”

Yet working from home

is not an option for every employee, or every organisation. Oxyb, from Community Fibre, explained, “Whilst the importance for home broadband has undoubtedly increased, the businesses with employees that are unable to work from home are adapting to a new model of interacting and transacting online. This shift has become crucial for these businesses to stay afloat, causing the need for affordable high-speed symmetrical service to increase. Businesses still need and want business grade broadband, in fact more so than ever. For businesses that expect to continue with office space beyond the pandemic we are seeing growing demand for faster, but lower priced services as these businesses look to manage their cost base.”

Reliable service

Potts from Colt, explained that reliability is one thing fibre must deliver. He said, “Customers want a low cost,

fast installation that delivers a reliable service, and one which can grow with them. Redundancy and resilience are becoming more important as, due to the move to the cloud, most applications and data are located offsite. Customers also require the ability to turn up new services, reach new cloud providers or regions, and connect securely to other offices or customers.”

Freesat’s Rowark said that value for money is key for customers in today’s turbulent economic climate. “Quality of service, ease of installation and use of the product itself are all key. Video streaming in all corners of the home is a test for broadband connection speeds, and one that is used by consumers to decide if there is value with their current provider. With the increase in home working, consumers are also keeping an eye on how well their broadband can cope with children streaming video content alongside holding >

down a connection to a Zoom meeting.”

Wilson from CityFibre said full fibre is not just an aspiration now – it’s essential. “The cloud is a big driver, of course, but like a lot of truly game-changing technologies, once they become all-pervasive, they also become completely indispensable. Just try telling any business or workers now that they can’t have a laptop and productivity apps, a smartphone or Wi-Fi access. The cloud is no different. It is becoming part of the essential digital ecosystem on which we all depend.”

Turning to the future he expects 2021 to be the most exciting and eventful year yet for full fibre in the UK. “The UK needs full fibre, and it needs it fast. This year has changed everything. It has accelerated change in the workplace and the transformation of businesses. Communications, collaboration, business processes and transactions and behind all that, partnerships and team working have all become digitally-dependent.”

Rowark argued, “In my opinion, customers do not really understand the cloud in its true technical form. They just know ‘stuff is kept in the cloud’ and the apps and services they love to use, encourages them to feel the need to be able to access that data quickly.”

Tarleton, from IQGeo, discussed the importance of customer service. He said, “With ever-intensifying competition for network providers and growing consumer choice driven by disintermediation and commoditisation of services, customer service has become a key differentiator. With the ongoing introduction of full fibre, users will justifiably demand that all aspects of the customer journey match the performance of the technology itself.”

Switch off warning

Gavin Jones, channel director at BT Wholesale highlighted



the impending PSTN switch off. He said, “Looking ahead to 2021, the biggest trend is going to be moving towards all-IP. It’s critical for partners and resellers to start thinking about their strategy ahead of the 2025 switch off, which altogether, isn’t that far away. The channel needs to extend education around new full-fibre products and services which will underpin connectivity infrastructure to ease the transition for partners and customers.”

“As the coronavirus situation develops, it’s likely that remote working will remain a reality for many – this means we need to prioritise solutions which support new workstyles, such as unified communications, cloud products and virtualised networks alongside enhanced connectivity for the home.”

“A key challenge for the channel as we head into 2021 will be maintaining the momentum of remote selling and finding innovative ways to develop relationships across the network.”

There’s no going back

Sachin Vaish, managing director at Vaioni Wholesale, said the Covid outbreak will bring fundamental changes. He said that lockdown showed “just how much the UK needs high capacity fibre”. Businesses will not go back to the way things were before March, and businesses and consumers alike now have a much firmer understanding of what they need from their connectivity provider.

Vaish added, “To state the obvious, we’re all relying on connectivity more than ever. Businesses are connecting armies of remote workers to cloud services and video conferencing. Fibre providers used to be able to focus bandwidth requirements at business centres during the day and residential suburbs in the evening. Now, business districts are all but silent while residential areas hum with almost continual digital activity.”

“Is that the future? Not quite, but it now seems certain that Covid will leave a lasting impression on the way we



*Sachin Vaish,
Vaioni Wholesale*

work, with hybrid working models – where employees spend some of the week in the office and some of it at home – set to become the norm. That has huge repercussions for fibre. 2021 will be about more than advances in physical infrastructure, important though it is. Fibre suppliers and resellers will thrive – or otherwise – on their ability to find new and creative ways to serve a new hybrid workforce and the companies scrambling to adjust to a brave new world of fluid, flexible work.”

For Community Fibre’s Oxby, the events of 2020 have simply put the spotlight on the government’s broadband targets. He said, “The pandemic has highlighted the importance of digitalisation and transition to an online business model, and a robust broadband infrastructure plays a critical role in this transition. With the government’s target of delivering ‘gigabit-capable broadband’ nationwide by 2025, broadband providers must work with its channel partners, the government, and landlords to ensure all London businesses benefit from the full-fibre broadband they need no matter where they work, as it is likely that businesses will need to rely on their online business further in 2021. With SMBs potentially feeling the brunt of the economic downturn from the pandemic, by working towards full-fibre rollout, SMBs will be empowered with the fast, reliable and affordable connectivity.”