Rural Broadband

Consultation Summary Report

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1. Summary

East Devon District Council ran the Rural Broadband Survey to better understand how poor broadband connectivity is affecting local communities, particularly rural businesses, town and parish councils, and organisations representing residents. This survey work followed on from a motion put to Council on 26 February 2025 requesting that the Portfolio Holder for Economy and Assets "write to all parish and town councils to canvass for evidence and experiences of poor connectivity in East Devon, and where feasible to seek the same from East Devon's many rural businesses".

Many stakeholders have raised ongoing concerns about slow speeds, unreliable service, and undelivered upgrade promises. The aim of this survey was to collect direct feedback on the social and economic impact of these issues. Findings from this survey will inform further action to address digital connectivity gaps across the district and support future advocacy with government and industry partners.

2. Survey Goals and Methodology

The goal of the survey was to gather clear evidence about the extent and consequences of broadband 'not-spots' in East Devon. Respondents were invited to share their personal and professional experiences, challenges faced due to poor connectivity, and any attempts they had made to resolve these issues. The survey was open to:

- Town and parish councils

- Rural businesses

- Organisations representing residents

The findings will help guide local policy decisions and support formal representations to central government, industry providers, and regional programmes such as Connecting Devon & Somerset.

3. Survey Process

The survey was created using an online platform and promoted through a multi-channel approach including:

- Direct emails to all town and parish councils

- Social media posts on the Council's platforms

- Outreach through business networks and stakeholder groups

The survey opened on the 15 of May at 5pm and closed on the 6 June at 5pm. After the closing date, responses were compiled and analysed to identify common patterns and key areas of concern. The feedback will support the Council's broader engagement strategy on rural digital infrastructure, including actions proposed by the Portfolio Holder for Economy and Assets and the Council Leader.

4. Data Analysis

The survey received 62 contributions from town and parish councils, chambers of commerce, and other organisations representing businesses or residents and 48 contributions from businesses. Appendix 1 shows a map of business responders by postcode and a list of those town and parish councils who responded.

4.1 Analysis of responses to the questions submitted by town and parish councils, chambers of commerce, and other organisations representing businesses or residents.

From the businesses and/or residents you represent, what are the most common complaints or challenges raised about broadband connectivity in rural areas?

A summary of the free text responses shows the key themes:

1. Slow Speeds and Inconsistent Performance

- Many areas experience extremely low broadband speeds, often below 2 Mbps.

- Performance is highly variable, with noticeable drops during peak times (e.g. evenings).

- Upload speeds are especially poor, affecting activities like video calls and cloud use.

2. Poor Reliability and Frequent Dropouts

- Broadband connections are often unstable, with regular outages or sudden dropouts.

- Some residents and businesses report being without service for several days at a time.

- This impacts daily life, work-from-home ability, and access to essential services.

3. Lack of Coverage and Infrastructure Gaps

- Significant 'not-spots' exist where fibre broadband is unavailable or limited.

- Some rural locations are entirely excluded from any current or planned upgrades.

- Mobile signals are poor or non-existent in many areas, leaving no backup option.

4. Broken Promises and Abandoned Schemes

- Widespread frustration over cancelled contracts (e.g. Airband, Gigaclear).

- Several communities report years of unmet upgrade promises by providers or Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS).

- The digital divide between nearby connected and unconnected areas is stark and growing.

5. Cost and Inequality

- Households in rural areas pay premium prices for inferior service.

- Limited provider choice leads to monopolistic pricing or no affordable alternatives.

- Poor connectivity contributes to wider social and economic inequality, including reduced house prices, business impacts, and isolation for vulnerable residents.

What initiatives or solutions have you seen (or would you recommend) to improve broadband services for rural communities? What can national or local government do to help?

A summary of the free text responses shows the key themes:

1. Full Fibre Rollout and Infrastructure Investment

- Strong demand for **full fibre (FTTP)** connections to all rural properties and businesses.

- Many call for government-backed investment to complete unfinished or abandoned schemes.

- Widespread frustration with partial rollouts (e.g. poles or cabinets installed but not connected).

2. Accountability and Reform of Delivery Programmes

- Significant loss of confidence in **Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS)** and contractors like Airband and Gigaclear.

- Respondents urge councils and government to **hold providers accountable** and improve oversight.

- Some suggest replacing failed schemes with a **coordinated, technology-neutral strategy** that combines fibre, mobile and satellite where appropriate.

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3. Support for Affordability and Accessibility

- **Subsidies or grants** are recommended to help households and not just businesses install broadband infrastructure.

- Cost concerns are widespread—residents want **fair pricing**, especially when receiving poor service.

- Suggestions include **price regulation** in monopoly areas and government-led service guarantees.

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4. Mobile and Backup Connectivity

- Many rural areas have **no reliable mobile signal**, leaving residents without any backup during outages.

- Suggested improvements include **better mobile coverage (e.g. 4G/5G masts)** and **battery backup** for broadband during power cuts, especially for vulnerable users.

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5. Legislative and Policy Action

- Calls for national government to **legislate high-speed broadband as a basic utility**, like electricity or water.

- Councils are urged to **prioritise digital infrastructure in planning** and engage directly with providers.

- Some propose **joint initiatives across Devon** to pool influence and resources—similar to the Devon Water Summit model.

If broadband infrastructure were improved in rural areas, what potential economic, social or business opportunities do you foresee for those you represent?

A summary of the free text responses shows the key themes:

1. Economic Growth and Business Resilience

- **More businesses could operate locally** (especially home-based or digital enterprises).

- **Improved online market access**, faster transactions, and efficient communications would boost productivity.

- Broadband upgrades would **help local shops, venues, and tourism businesses** stay competitive and take payments reliably.

- **House prices could increase** in line with better-connected areas, strengthening the local economy.

2. Increased Homeworking and Employment Opportunities

- Better broadband enables **more people to work from home**, supporting a wider range of employment options.

- Reduces the need for commuting, cutting costs and environmental impact.

- Opens up **job markets across regions**—especially relevant in remote or border parishes.

3. Reduced Rural Isolation and Improved Social Wellbeing

- Enhanced internet access helps **vulnerable residents stay connected** to services, friends and family.

- Broadband-enabled access to **telehealth, online education, and community support** helps reduce isolation.

- Supports mental health by enabling **everyday digital participation** (e.g. booking GP appointments, video calls).

4. Stronger Public Services and Community Facilities
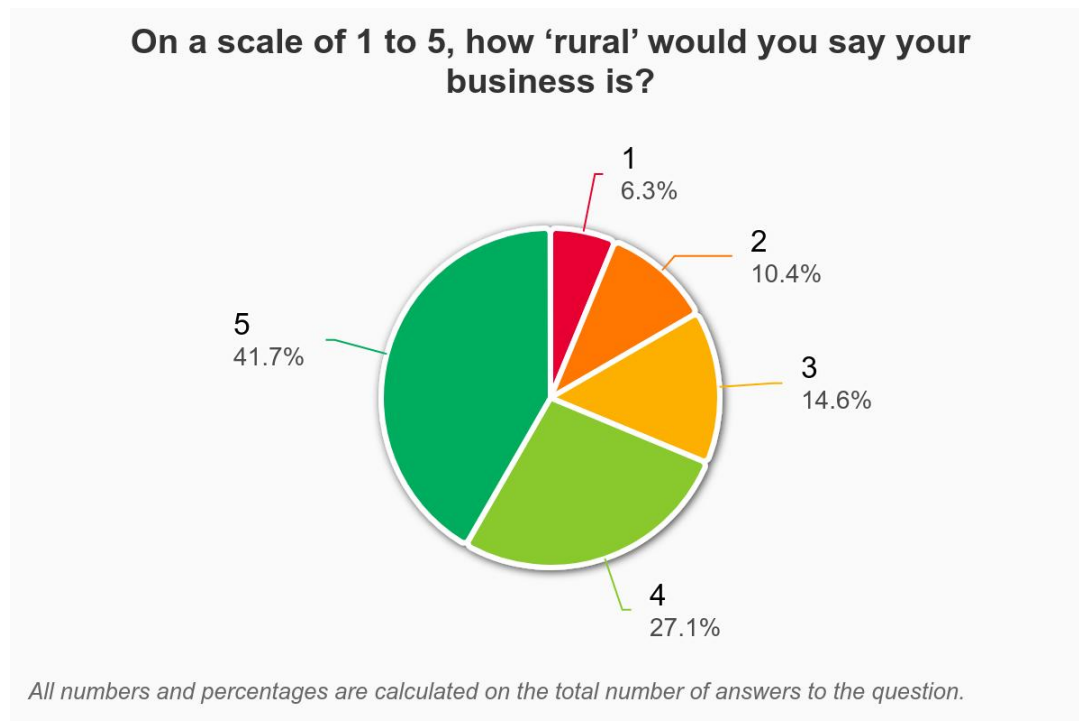
- Parish halls, schools, and community venues could **reliably host events, digital services, and video conferencing**.

- Card payments and Wi-Fi access in shared spaces would return or improve.

- Broadband is increasingly vital for **emergency communication systems and local service delivery**.

5. Greater Equality and Retention of Rural Populations

- Reliable broadband is seen as a **basic infrastructure need**, essential for inclusion in modern society.

- Improved service would **support younger people to remain in rural areas**, reducing population decline.

- Helps close the digital divide, ensuring rural residents aren't left behind in health, education, or business.

## 4.2. Analysis of responses to questions submitted by businesses

On a scale of 1 to 5, how 'rural' would you say your business is?

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1 — 6.3%
2 — 10.4%
3 — 14.6%
4 — 27.1%
5 — 41.7%

All numbers and percentages are calculated on the total number of answers to the question.

The majority of respondents consider their business to be located in a highly rural area, with 41.7% selecting the highest rating of 5 and a further 27.1% selecting 4. This means that nearly 70% of businesses that took part in the survey identified as being in very rural settings. A smaller proportion rated their business as moderately rural (14.6%), while only 10.4% selected 2 and just 6.3% selected 1, indicating a less rural environment. These results show that the consultation responses primarily reflect the experiences of businesses operating in rural and hard-to-reach locations, which is important context when considering the challenges they report with broadband connectivity.

How would you rate broadband provision in your area on a scale of 1 to 5?

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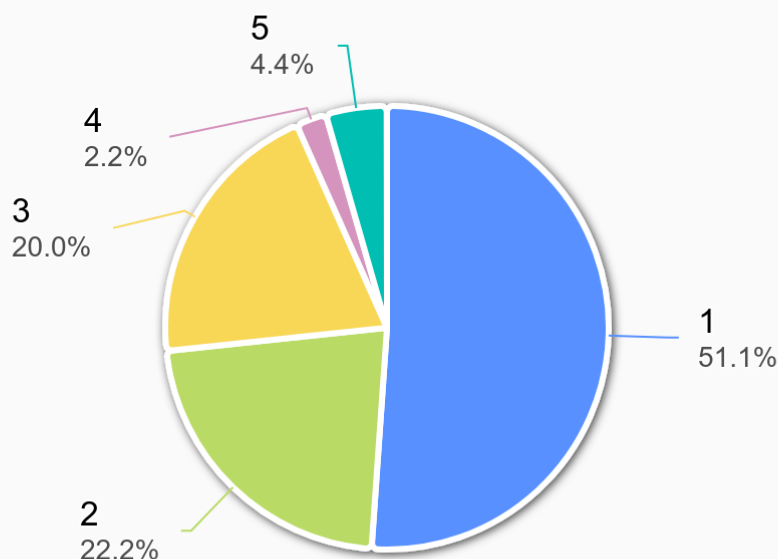
All numbers and percentages are calculated on the total number of answers to the question.

Over half of respondents (51.1%) rated broadband provision in their area as 1 out of 5, indicating very poor service, while another 22.2% rated it a 2, reflecting consistently slow or unreliable connections. Around 20% gave a neutral rating of 3, suggesting average performance—neither notably good nor bad. Only a small minority felt service was strong, with 2.2% selecting 4 and just 4.4% rating it 5. Overall, nearly three-quarters of respondents view their broadband provision as below average, underscoring the urgent need for improved connectivity in these communities.

Have you faced any specific challenges due to poor internet connectivity? If so please detail them below, and explain how you worked around them (if at all)?

A summary of the free text responses shows the key themes:

1. Unstable Connections Disrupting Business Operations

- Frequent dropouts and low reliability make it difficult to hold video calls, process transactions, or use cloud-based systems.

- Internet loss affects online bookings, card payments, and day-to-day communication.

- Businesses report reputational damage (e.g. lower ratings on booking sites) due to unreliable service.

2. Slow Speeds Limiting Productivity and Growth

- Uploading large files, running multiple devices, and using data-heavy tools (e.g. Teams, Zoom) is often unworkable.

- Tasks that should take minutes are delayed, wasting staff time and causing frustration.

- Businesses cannot host their own websites or services due to bandwidth limits.

3. High Costs and Workarounds for Basic Connectivity

- Many have resorted to costly alternatives such as 4G hubs, additional routers, or satellite broadband—often paying £90+ per month for still-inadequate service.

- Some travel to towns or work from rented units for better internet access.

- Multiple responses mention **no viable workaround**, especially in mobile not-spot areas.

4. Lack of Infrastructure and Provider Support

- Some respondents have **no connection at all**, with fibre infrastructure installed but never activated.

- Users report outdated copper wiring, insufficient cabinet capacity, or being told there's "no capacity" left.

- Customer service from providers is often described as slow, unresponsive, or unhelpful.

5. Social and Economic Consequences

- Poor internet has a knock-on effect on rural economies, education, and quality of life.

- Businesses lose income; some cannot function properly or have relocated to cope.

- Remote learning, homeworking, and running rural accommodation or services are all significantly hindered.

5.2 What improvements in broadband connectivity (if any) would make the biggest positive difference to your business? What can national or local government do to help?

1. Fibre-to-the-Premises (FTTP) Installation

- A clear and repeated request for **full fibre connectivity directly to homes and business premises**, not just to cabinets.

- Many report fibre has been **promised but not delivered**, or that infrastructure is in place (e.g. poles or boxes) but never connected.

- Respondents are frustrated by years of **delayed rollouts and broken commitments**, particularly with CDS and Airband projects.

2. Reliable and Consistent Speeds (Not Just Faster Downloads)

- Businesses emphasise that **reliability and stability** are just as important as high speeds.

- Upload speeds are frequently too slow for modern business use (e.g. cloud backups, VoIP, video conferencing).

- Connections that drop out during poor weather or peak hours create major operational challenges.

3. Support for Truly Rural Properties

- Respondents call for **prioritisation of remote and hard-to-reach properties**, rather than focusing further investment in semi-rural or already-connected areas.

- Many want national or local government to **mandate universal rural access**, including one fibre and one wireless option per household.

- There are calls for **targeted subsidies or voucher schemes** for isolated areas where standard infrastructure is unviable.

4. Improved Accountability and Follow-through

- Strong feedback that **local and national government need to enforce delivery promises** made by providers.

- Several areas report fibre infrastructure passing through their land but with **no option to connect**.

- Respondents want greater **transparency on rollout plans** and timelines, and meaningful **penalties for providers who withdraw**.

5. Financial and Practical Support for Businesses

- Calls for **grants or vouchers** to help fund alternative solutions (e.g. Starlink, antennas, site surveys).

- Suggestions include **lower charges for slow service**, recognition of the cost burden for workaround systems, and **government-backed initiatives to close the affordability gap**.

- Some business owners report needing help just to understand what options are available and how to access them.

5.3 If broadband connectivity improved, what new products, services or opportunities (if any) would you consider offering?

1. Improved Hospitality and Guest Services

- Many tourism and accommodation providers (e.g. holiday lets, glamping, Airbnb) said they could:

    o **Attract more bookings** by advertising fast, reliable Wi-Fi

    o **Cater to remote workers and digital nomads**

    o Enable **on-site services like streaming, Wi-Fi access, and contactless payments**

- Poor connectivity is already causing **lost bookings** or negative guest feedback.

2. Enhanced Business Efficiency and Expansion

- Faster, more reliable broadband would enable:

    o Use of **cloud-based tools** (e.g. Xero, Google Drive, online booking systems)

    o Better customer response times through websites and social media

    o **Higher client volumes** and improved project delivery

- Some say they could **stop relying on expensive leased lines or satellite services**.

3. New Products or Digital Services

- Several businesses mentioned they could:

    o Launch an **online shop**

    o Provide **online training or longer digital courses**

    o Host **web services** or offer **remote consultancy or data work**

- One farm mentioned upgrading to **automated milking robots**, which require high-speed internet.

4. Work-from-Home and Employment Opportunities

- Better broadband would allow:

    o More people to **work entirely from home**, reducing travel and emissions

    o Hiring of **local support staff** instead of outsourcing to cities

    o Marketing rural properties as **remote working spaces**

- Professionals (e.g. interpreters, consultants, artists) highlighted the **barrier to expansion** caused by slow or unstable internet.

5. Increased Reliability for Existing Services

- While some businesses wouldn't launch new services, they said:

    o Improved broadband would **transform their reliability, customer service, and productivity**

    o They could **deliver existing services more efficiently and cost-effectively**

    o **Client satisfaction and competitiveness** would improve

5. Key Findings

A bulleted list summarizing the most important takeaways from the survey

Responses from Town and Parish Councils, Chambers of Commerce, and Representative Organisations

- **Widespread dissatisfaction with speed, reliability, and infrastructure gaps**
  Many rural areas suffer from extremely slow speeds, unstable connections, and 'not-spots' with no fibre access or mobile signal. This severely affects work, education, and day-to-day life.

- **Frustration over broken promises and failed delivery schemes**
  Respondents report long delays, cancelled contracts (e.g. Airband, Gigaclear), and minimal accountability from Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS) and other providers.

- **Strong support for full fibre rollout and investment**
  There is a clear demand for government-backed full fibre infrastructure to every rural property, with concerns about unfinished rollouts and lack of progress.

- **Broadband seen as a basic utility with wide-ranging benefits**
  Improved broadband is linked to economic growth, reduced isolation, stronger public services, and greater equality for rural residents.

Responses from Businesses

- **Majority face very poor broadband provision in rural areas**
  Over 70% of businesses rate their service as poor or very poor, with common issues including dropouts, unusable upload speeds, and high costs for workarounds.

- **Connectivity challenges are harming business viability**
  Businesses report lost income, operational inefficiencies, damaged reputations, and in some cases, relocation due to poor service.

- **Clear demand for FTTP, rural prioritisation, and oversight**
  Businesses call for fibre-to-the-premises installation, improved rollout transparency, and stronger enforcement of provider commitments—especially in hard-to-reach areas.

- **Improved broadband would enable service expansion and innovation**
  Faster, more reliable connections would allow businesses to offer digital services, attract remote workers, adopt smart tech (e.g. milking robots), and improve existing operations.

6. Next Steps

The motion put to Council on 26 February 2025 outlines the following three next steps:

1. The Leader is asked to invite other Devon authorities to participate in a joint initiative focused on rural broadband connectivity. Using the Devon Water Summit as a model, this forum should bring together district councils, Devon County Council, telecoms providers, CDS representatives, and relevant public agencies to review the costs of poor connectivity and develop a coordinated strategy for accelerating superfast broadband rollout across Devon. Such a partnership would give rural communities a stronger voice and increase pressure on central government and infrastructure providers.

2. The Leader is also asked to write to the Leader of Devon County Council and the Programme Director of Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS) to express disappointment at the cancellation of over half of Airband's connection commitments. The letter should request an urgent briefing to East Devon District Council, explaining the current position, outlining the steps being taken to address delivery failures, and detailing how CDS has strengthened its due diligence to avoid future breakdowns in service provision. This transparency is vital to rebuild trust with affected communities and ensure public investment achieves its intended outcomes.

3. In parallel, the Portfolio Holder should write to the Minister for Telecoms and East Devon's Members of Parliament to reiterate the serious impacts of broadband 'not-spots' in the district. The letter should urge government to provide a clear plan of action, including reforms to delivery programmes, increased accountability for contractors, and a renewed commitment to delivering full fibre infrastructure in rural areas. With rural digital exclusion continuing to hinder local growth and community sustainability, national intervention is urgently needed.

Appendix 1: Responder Data

The map below shows the postcodes of the businesses who responded to the survey:
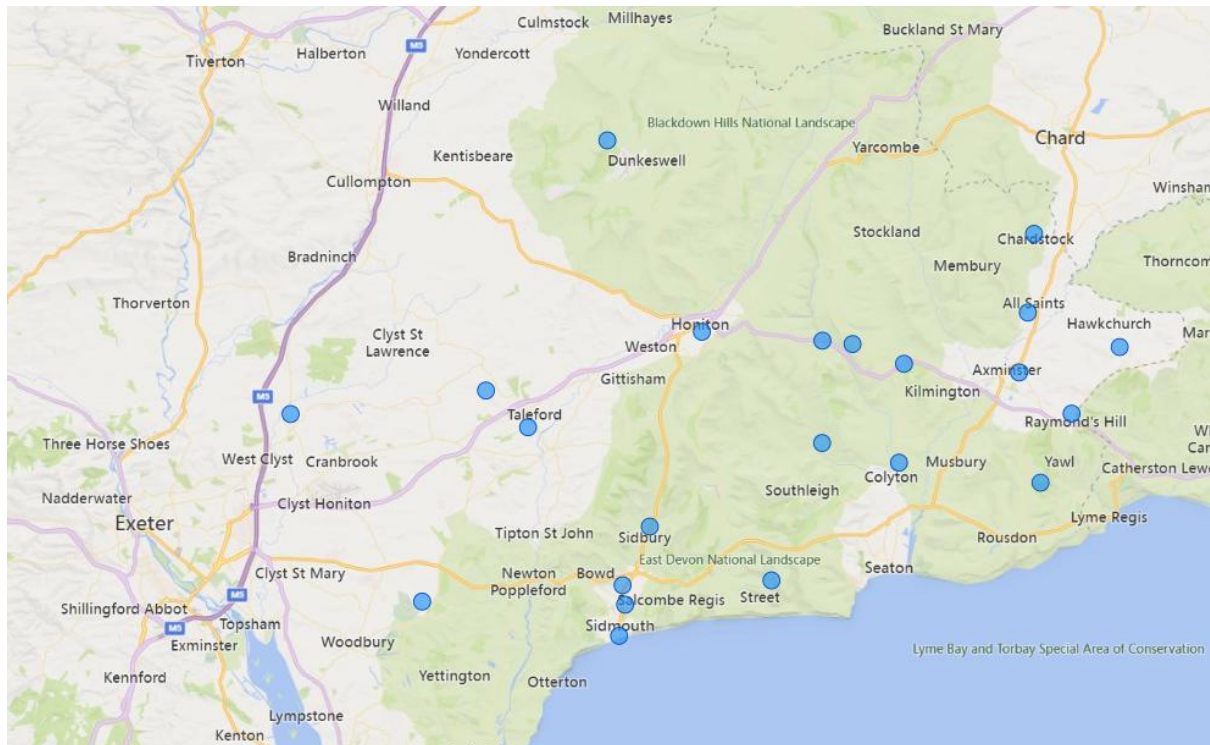
The list below shows the town and parish councils who responded to the survey. This list does not include business and other representative groups who responded.

- All Saints Parish Council
- Axmouth Parish Council
- Beer Parish Council
- Branscombe Parish Council
- Broadhembury Parish Council
- Clyst Hydon Parish Council
- Clyst St Lawrence Parish Council
- Colyton Parish Council
- Combe Raleigh Parish Council
- Dunkeswell Parish Council
- Exmouth Town Council
- Gittisham Parish Council
- Membury Parish Council
- Northleigh Parish Council
- Offwell Parish Council
- Plymtree Parish Council
- Rewe Parish Council
- Talaton Parish Council
- Uplyme Parish Council
- West Hill Parish Council
- Whimple Parish Council
- Yarcombe Parish Council