WRITTEN EVIDENCE FROM E. CORAL SMITH

SLIDDERY TELEPHONE EXCHANGE
(EXCHANGE ACTIVATED TYPE EXCHANGE)

In our local paper last week (The Arran Banner), was an article stating that the Scottish Government was investigating broadband provision in rural areas. As someone who has spent the last 2 years complaining constantly about our provision on the above exchange, I telephoned our local MSP, Kenneth Gibson, to ask if our views would be taken into account.

I received a reply from him today, which states that you needed to have received submissions by 18th November, the day the article was printed. He suggested that as none of us knew about this (it wasn’t mentioned in the article), I should still write and let you know of my problems and concerns with the broadband provision on this exchange, but that he would certainly ensure that he passed on all our concerns.

He receives 98% of his complaints about BT’s broadband provision, from the 2% of his constituents who reside in Sliddery!

I’m not quite sure where to start!

I suppose that there are 2 main points of concern.

The first is that as an Exchange Activate Exchange, we have a maximum broadband download speed of .5kpbs, and a slower upload speed of less than .3kbps. I’d like to be able to sell my art and craft work online, but when it takes more than 7 minutes to upload 2 (compressed) photographs, you’ll appreciate that I’d end up spending most of my time doing that, rather than actually being able to create anything. This is not assisting those of us who live here who would like to be able to run small internet businesses, or who work in graphics.

Due to BT’s initial underestimation of broadband take up on our exchange, they have already had to increase the number of lines available, and we understand that they are about to do this again (or perhaps already have done so). This will of course slow down the service even more for all of us.

We have to pay the same fees to BT for our service, which is 1/16th of that available in other villages in Arran. We do understand that we’re not the only exchange of this type on Arran, but cannot understand why, when a number of other Exchange Activate Exchanges were being upgraded (including Pirnmill, Arran, a smaller exchange than Sliddery), ours was not upgraded to the full service.

BT’s attitude is that it is more expensive to supply broadband to our type of rural exchanges due to the low customer base. Whilst this may be so, it still doesn’t explain why a smaller exchange on Arran was upgraded, and why we should be expected to pay what amounts to an exorbitant fee for a sub-standard service, in comparison to other users here and elsewhere. On other exchanges in Arran, there is a far greater choice of broadband providers, and a much larger choice of tariff. Many subscribers on this exchange are pensioners on fixed incomes trying to keep in touch with their families on the mainland and further afield, are struggling to afford BT’s charges, with no other choice available.

Having contacted Mr. Shanks, BT Head of Scottish Affairs, I have to say that his response does not fill me, or any other subscriber to this exchange, with any confidence whatsoever that the Sliddery Exchange will be upgraded in the near future, if at all.

My 2nd point is that there are constant problems with the broadband supply from the Sliddery Exchange. We are currently more than 3 weeks into our latest problem, which I have to say is the worst to date. I’m not sure what is going on, but it would appear from the emails I’ve received (when I’ve been able to log on and read them), and the telephone calls received, that all subscribers to this exchange do not have a “full” service (.5kbps) all of the time. In
fact, most of us for the entire month of November have had a partial service some days, and have been unable to log on at all on many others.

In correspondence with Mr. Shanks at the end of August, when writing to him about the last major problems we experienced here, I made the point that even though I repeatedly told those who deal with BT fault reporting that not only I, but both of my neighbours (on separate lines), all had the same problem, so therefore it was nothing to do with my equipment or internal wiring and the fault was most likely at the exchange as on all previous occasions, they paid no attention to this. His reply was that they (BT) were not geared up to deal with “bulk fault reporting”, and unless we each reported faults, the staff would have to treat a report as an individual problem.

There can have been few subscribers here this month who have not reported faults, but in spite of this, many of them have been told (including me), that BT employees can tell from the equipment they use for checking the service, that it is working OK. This, when most of us are unable to connect to the service at all, often for days at a time! My neighbour reported the current problem on 4/11/11 by that time at the end of her tether, I reported it again on 8/11/11, and we have each had to make 3 or 4 more contacts with BT to state that the problem has not been resolved. They have frequently not phoned us back when they said they would, and we have, quite literally, each spent many hours on the phone to try and have the problem resolved.

It is not reasonable to expect people (with small children, jobs etc.) to spend upwards of 45 minutes at a time reporting a fault, and going through the same useless internal checks, when it’s known that there are many others elsewhere (in 2 other villages) all on the same exchange, experiencing the same problems. BT are not dealing with us in a decent fashion, and this, in addition to the appalling broadband speed, is just not acceptable, but we seem to be unable to resolve the issue.

On innumerable occasions in the last month, I’ve abandoned trying to run a broadband speed check, as I couldn’t even get the relevant page up on the computer. One evening (10/11/11), I did manage to run it, but it took 1½ hours to complete, and the download speed I was receiving was .184kpbs.

Obviously, I don’t know what the problems currently are at the exchange. I, and many others, suspect that they may have increased the number of lines available again, due to the waiting list of subscribers who currently can’t get broadband at all, to such an extent, that this has caused a “melt-down” at the exchange.

I, and the other Sliddery subscribers, feel that the only answer to resolving our ongoing issues, which are getting worse and worse, and more and more regular, is to upgrade our exchange to a full platform. There is obviously some major work required at the exchange.

I’d like to say that I was delighted when broadband was introduced here, and was one of the earliest subscribers to it on the Sliddery exchange. I had no idea at that point, that there would be different levels of service supplied here on Arran (or elsewhere).

Many of us here are trying to run businesses of varying sizes, types and complexity, and this is causing all of us problems which just cannot be overcome. It was my understanding that the Scottish government invested in broadband in rural areas so that no matter where we lived, we would not be disadvantaged in comparison with anywhere living and working elsewhere. Sadly, in Sliddery at least, this is not proving to be the case.