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WIGHTFIBRE

John Irvine,
WightFibre
CEO



“The Isle of Wight is leading the country for ultra-fast broadband, and that’s because of WightFibre.”

2023 will see a major milestone for the roll-out of full-fibre – but don’t get left behind, says WightFibre’s CEO John Irvine

What does 2023 look like for WightFibre and the progress of the Gigabit Island?

This year will see the completion of our main roll-out and we expect to have reached 65,000 out of the 80,000 homes and businesses on the Island. We start the year with 50,000 homes already being able to receive service from WightFibre, so that’s already the majority of the Island.

Summer 2023 will see the end of most of the roadworks. The traffic disruption from our work is already a fraction of what it was previously, because we’re now working in more rural areas. Freshwater is almost completely done, along with Yarmouth. We’re now in places like Brighstone and Brading, as well as Bembridge where works will begin on the High Street in January.



This year, all of the work is in the towns in the West Wight and all the villages in the middle and to the East, like Rookley, Havenstreet and Wroxall.

So by the end of this year when you've reached 65,000 premises – what does that mean for the remaining 15,000 that still won't be able to receive your service?

We have a finite period when we're going to have the large scale construction capability here on the Island, and beyond the end of this year we'll have less than two years to reach the final 15,000 premises. Whilst we'll retain a small capability to keep building the network, particularly where new developments are being built and we want to be able to serve those as well, our ability to do large scale construction is going to diminish. So there's a relatively short window up until 2025 when we hope to hit that 80,000 mark.

What sort of properties and locations make up the 15,000 that we're talking about?

It is predominantly unadopted roads and multi-dwelling units, like blocks of flats, that we had to leave behind on the first pass-through. We need a wayleave from the owners of such roads, if we need to leave the public highway, and some owners have not been very forthcoming especially in the early days of the build. With blocks of flats, our fibre has to run into each individual flat, in order to be able to provide them with these ultra-fast speeds. That also requires a wayleave from the owner of the building and the permission of the management committee or organisation that looks after that block of flats. It's a slow process because people are quite understandably concerned about how that will look on their building, although in reality these fibre optic cables are so small you barely see them.

We know that lots of residents want to take WightFibre's service but we're waiting on permission from housing associations and in some cases the local authority. A resident in a private block of flats might contact their freeholder in order to make the process happen, but it's a slow process.

It is getting better. Five years ago people didn't really know what full-fibre was and we were knocking on closed doors. People didn't see the need for it and so simply didn't respond to our requests. Now we are pushing on open doors for the most part. But it's still a very slow process.

So the clock is ticking for landowners and property owners to grant permission....

I don't want to scaremonger but the risk is that some premises will be left behind and ultimately don't get full fibre broadband at all. That's the risk that we're trying to mitigate. The desire is to raise awareness of that issue and encourage people to respond more quickly.

We have small pockets of homes dotted across the Island, for example, where we could deliver service within weeks, even days, if the IW Council would give us a wayleave for the small bit of land that they own, over which the fibre needs to run.

Will everyone ultimately be able to receive full fibre broadband from WightFibre?

There are around four or five thousand premises that we haven't figured out how we're going to reach yet. But my estimate is that it will be fewer than two thousand of these that won't ever get full fibre. We are looking at alternative technologies to serve them with faster broadband, using wireless technology to deliver a fixed broadband connection.

You announced the Gigabit Island back in November 2017. How has the project evolved since then?

When we initially announced our roll-out timetable we said at the time that we would reach 50,000 premises by the end of 2022. It's now January 2023 and we're just about reaching that 50,000 target. The project is about 12 to 18 months behind where we said it would be. However, we're now going to do even more than we originally promised. Our initial 50,000 has expanded to 80,000 and that's around 96% coverage of the Island. That's the highest percentage coverage you'll get anywhere.

The current availability of full fibre on the Island is around 58%, versus availability in the rest of the UK of 35%. So we've already got nearly double the capacity here compared to the rest of the country, and by the end of the year that will be up to almost 80%, which is streets ahead of the rest of the country. WightFibre is leading the way. ■



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