

## The future for broadband: fibre to the home?

*3-C helps finance visit to Neunen, Holland, a small market town which is leading the way with this technology.*

A few weeks ago three of us from the Hebden Royd area – Robert Currey, John Frederiksen and Richard Hull – visited a town in the Netherlands called **Neunen**. We went to a workshop organised by an organisation associated with the Community Broadband Network. The workshop was to demonstrate a model for developing a community-controlled communication system called **Fibre To The Home** (FTTH). Optical Fibre is essentially flexible glass, and you send light signals down the fibre. You've probably seen Christmas trees made with optical fibres – lots of very thin flexible fibres with a dot of light coming out at each end.

**FTTH projects use Optical Fibre to deliver the three key services of Telephone, Television and Broadband Internet, to a household.** It's like the Cable TV services from NTI/TeleWest (soon to be Virgin Media) available in all cities and large towns, even Halifax!! Except the telephone is much cheaper, the broadband internet much better, and who knows what will be possible with TV services.

In Neunen there is Optical Fibre to 95% of households, and the network of cables is owned by a local co-operative called OnsNet (Our Net, in English). People in Neunen are no longer reliant on the 'incumbent' operators of telephone, television and broadband services – they have their own network. The network was built by a small company called Close The Gap, run by Kees Rovers, and then handed over to the co-operative.

The Community Broadband Network have now formed a joint venture called **Close The Gap UK**, and they are looking for similar towns in the UK to conduct similar projects. That was why we went.

*Robert writes:*

The overriding principle in Nuenen is "Forget the technology; focus on the people." From our trip, the things we witnessed in this wealthy retirement suburb of Eindhoven in the Netherlands it appears that they practice what they preach.

The residents in Nuenen weren't a group of people clamouring to have fast internet, complaining about asymmetric services or demanding video telephone calls. It is understandable why the KPN (the Dutch version on our BT) public relations department says there is no requirement for a high speed technology such as Fibre to the Home (FTTH.) Neither is it a business case for KPN, they already have an asset (the old ADSL telephone lines) that is in their interest to 'sweat' the last penny out of.

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The government (or at least one part of it) in the Netherlands was concerned that high speed telecoms should be rolled out; yet with large amounts of money going begging for Fibre to Eindhoven only consultants made hay, not one centimetre of cable was laid.

It has been assumed only large roll-outs of telecoms infrastructure is actually cost effective; and KPN and other incumbent operators are the only businesses capable of such large roll outs; this gives them great power and they aren't ready to do it, not without massive subsidy.

However Kees Rovers (who spent 20 years at Rabobank, a Dutch cooperative bank, he also introduced the French Minitel system in the Netherlands) tackled a much smaller roll out than was thought possible. The project was successful, fibre was laid to 8000 households in Nuenen with 97% of households signing up. Kees does admit that there is a chicken and egg situation for high speed telecoms, only when people have access to it do they have a demand for it; his company is called close the gap as he intends to solve this conundrum.

Rather than arguing with government or KPN, Kees success was at a personal level. He summaries the method that works as the 'seven pillars':

1. A business model that can be funded
2. An 'Us' feeling with a strong emphasis on local ownership.
3. The ability to offer 3 basic services; telephony, TV and super-fast internet.
4. Adding value through locally generated services and content (local TV, video contacts with doctors, recreation and clubs, churches and schools).
5. Getting the communications right. Close the Gap developed an extensive 'communications protocol' and used it to drive engagement with the people of Nuenen as individuals and with various groups and clubs.
6. Focusing on customer care with a local emphasis.
7. Delivering a high quality network after a rapid build with little disruption to the town.

The business model doesn't require any funding from outside the community. The community buys a mortgage product over 20 years; the value of the network to be mortgaged is deduced from members of the community signing contracts to use the service in the first two years (the first year being free.) In Nuenen membership of the co-operative that owned the network (and access to the other services) cost 20 euro a month. A full package of cable, phone, internet and membership is 60 euro. The business also had the mantra 'Community owned, professionally run.' All the building and running was put out to tender.

The 'Us' feeling and the communications pillars were remarkably successful in Nuenen with 97% initial sign up and over 80% retention after the initial contracts ran out. It hard to argue that with fewer than 50% of the Nuenen population owning a PC that people were swayed by the prospect of the technology; instead it seems that people were concerned to 'control their own destiny' and not be left with the crumbs that KPN or their glacial government might provide them.

A partnership with the local housing association was very productive and it is on association land the Point of Presence (POP) was constructed. This however gave KPN opportunity for dirty tricks: complaining in Parliament about a housing association investing in telecoms.

Now in Nuenen there is a focus on services, there is an 'OnsNet' office in the centre of town. In this office paid employees investigate and implement services demanded by the shareholders of the Co-operative i.e. the community: part of the 'Us' feeling.

There is a focus in Nuenen on their ageing population, probably a reflection of demographics, housing association as well as social conscience.

The network has inspired applications in remote medical care, inclusion and safety; in fact it would appear that the

applications don't strictly need the speed and technology of the network but that the 'Us' nature of the network has created improved well being.

Applications in Nuenen are not startling impressive, there is nothing that you could put your finger on and call it a killer app that means a community will demand a fast network just for that service.

If we want to control our own technological destinies in our market town backwater, BT is not a consideration, our government is not interested, we don't demonstrate a 'need' for a commercial outfit. Kees, Close the Gap and the co-operative model of the Rochdale pioneers seems to be a viable proposition.

*Sunday, 11 February 2007*