

FROM THE INDUSTRY

Unplugged

WITH HELEN WYLDE-ARCHIBALD
CEO, WILDANET

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CORNWALL BASED BROADBAND PROVIDER WILDANET HAS HAD A VERY SUCCESSFUL YEAR, RECENTLY WINNING TWO MAJOR INDUSTRY AWARDS — THE BEST RURAL FIBRE PROVIDER AT THE 2024 UK FIBRE AWARDS AND BROADBAND PROVIDER OF THE YEAR AWARD AT THE 2024 CONNECTED BRITAIN AWARDS.



FROM THE INDUSTRY

WHAT DID THAT MEAN TO YOU?

Of all the things that I've ever won in my career, I have to say, that was probably the most significant. We try incredibly hard to do the right thing; we're a B Corp, which is often referred to as the 'fairtrade of business'. To receive that sort of acknowledgement amongst all the networks out there, including the big players was just a remarkable moment for us. I was in shock that whole evening.

AND WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?

We're now working with Nokia on our Type B (a Project Gigabit Contract for Cornwall). In this case our Type B is the size of our two Type As put together. They tend to be a bit more geographically spread. If you imagine Cornwall in tiger stripes, we had the far west end and we had the middle, but we didn't have the two bits in between. This gives us the rest to go at, plus the Isles of Scilly. For a rural county with government funding for Project Gigabit, the whole county benefits. In Cornwall we need to be able to attract jobs and companies to the area, things like defence jobs, sustainable farming, agri-tech as well as offshore wind power.

HOW DID NOKIA GET INVOLVED?

We've always had a great working relationship with Nokia, who offered a turnkey solution. Most of their beliefs and ideals match up with our own in terms of wanting to be sustainable, how we work with people, plus they embrace the fact we're a B Corp, we want to employ locally. All together we provide a one-stop shop so that we can move quickly through the Type B with a trusted partner. Our suppliers and contractors can continue to work under that Type B arrangement, so nobody loses out. It also makes us a Nokia network going forward. Their planning, surveying, warehousing, materials have all been absolutely stunning too. It's been a great experience and it is completely new in the industry, and the first time that Nokia has done anything like this in the UK.

The company has expanded its network, working with Nokia on a new "Type B" project to cover more of the county. Wildanet has also become a B Corporation, embedding sustainability and social responsibility into its operations. The company's broadband rollout, supported by the government's Project Gigabit programme has been transformative for the Cornish economy. And a lot more besides. Broadband Journal caught up with CEO Helen Wyld-Archibald to find out more.

YOU'VE DONE INCREDIBLY WELL WITH AWARDS THIS YEAR, CONGRATULATIONS HELEN. HOW DO YOU FEEL AND WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR WILDANET?

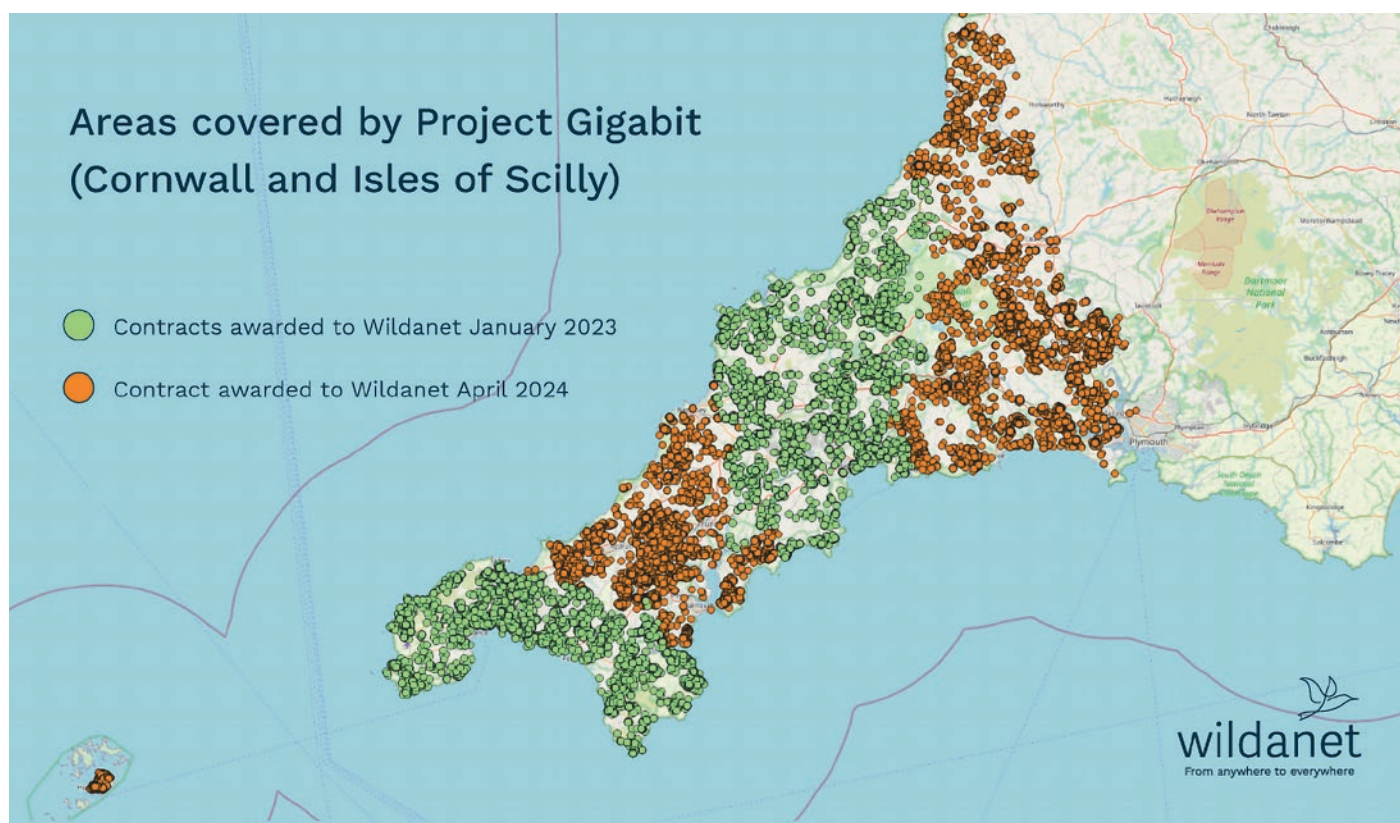
This year we won two really big awards that we're really proud of. The Best Rural Fibre Provider at the Fibre Awards - that's what we do. Our new chief operating officer Alastair Woods specialises in rural, and he's been absolutely transformational, helping us speed up what we want to do more quickly as we move through the county; it's been really positive for us.

CORNWALL IS RATHER DIFFERENT OF COURSE.

There are only just over half a million souls in Cornwall, so we really have to work at it. It's so different to what's going on in the city, where you can connect hundreds of homes a day, especially where you have blocks of flats in which there might be up to 1,000 people you're able to connect at once.

TELL ME ABOUT THE SECOND AWARD.

That was the Broadband Provider of the Year Award at the 2024 Connected Britain Awards; we didn't expect to win anything and were thrilled to have been recognised. I'd actually spent a day on my feet in high heels and I'd kicked my shoes off. Of course, we get the announcement and then I'm struggling to find my shoes! It was a very special moment for all of us at Wildanet.



HOW DOES YOUR B CORP STATUS TIE IN WITH YOUR SUSTAINABILITY OBJECTIVES?

If you truly believe and love where you come from, then you must take some accountability for it.

I've spent most of my life championing sustainability issues. I personally believe that if we don't do something we are heading for a probable mass extinction event, if we're not careful, or at very least some serious issues with the environment. In Cornwall we have a close association with the outdoors. People live so far away from each other that you have to travel some distance to get anywhere. You've got water on three sides when it's blowing a gale (and we have 150 odd storm days a year) the rain is horizontal and you can't hear yourself think. If you want to feel what it's going to be like if we have a rise in sea temperature and what's going to follow on in terms of our temperature and climate, come to Cornwall on a November day during a sea storm and watch the world go white with salt. That's becoming more common.

Many of the people who work for us are like-minded. We built an ESG agenda. There is the issue of greenwashing. You've got to have clear metrics, demonstrate that what you are doing has

value and purpose, that it's measurable and transparent. The B Corp pillars gave us all of that and allowed us to follow a pathway towards being a better company.

THAT IS PROBABLY NOT AS EASY AS IT SOUNDS.

Of all of the things that I've done, even ISO, this was actually really complicated, because it touches every element of your organisation. We had to change our Articles of Association, HR policies and people handbooks. It also impacted our strategy for our supply chain. It was a massive undertaking, but it signals to all our stakeholders that our intent is true in order to become a better company. The next generation only work for companies they want to work for and increasingly who demonstrate their credentials for social value and environmental impact. I feel quite inspired and comforted by the fact that generation are prepared to do that. The other thing is it's found some heroes, which we didn't expect.

HEROES?

One of my team went off and started looking at how we make tarmac more sustainable. When you dig tarmac up it's really important you put the layers of soil back in the ground in the right

order. How you deal with tarmac is also really important. He started working with one of our suppliers, Dynamic Fibre and sure enough discovered actually there's all sorts of things we can do around aggregate, around concrete to make ourselves more sustainable. There was real buy-in by the team and they were all striving to make this better.

Secondly the B Corp journey was also too much to take on our own, so we did some research; in the end we had about 40 companies step forward who went on the B Corp journey with us and we formed a community programme called B23 so we could all follow the B Corp journey together. This means that Cornwall now has more B Corps than any other county outside of London. We're very dependent on each other down here, there are so few of us. All of us coming together and helping each other was a great experience.

TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT PROJECT GIGABIT.

Project Gigabit is the UK government's rollout of lightning-fast, reliable broadband across the UK. The economics of building rural fibre are not straightforward; you need volume, competitive costs and scale. We're working on solid granite, and whilst there is some existing

infrastructure we cannot always rely on it. In Wadebridge we had to pump out three swimming pools of water before we could do anything, because it's below the water table, that's the sort of challenge we face daily. If we didn't have Project Gigabit behind us, Cornwall's broadband would never get built. You'd be talking about a smattering of small towns and nothing else. It allows us to do other good things on the back of that, all the good elements of the B Corp. So, there is a virtuous circle around that provision. Cornwall should be transformed in terms of connectivity, and it'll last at least 30 to 40 years. That's a good reason to get out of bed in the morning, isn't it?

YOU HAVE A LOT TO BE PROUD OF! HOW MANY HOMES ARE NOW PASSED IN CORNWALL?

At the moment we are 50% through Project Gigabit on the two type As, and we started building our type B in November alongside delivering our commercial build plan at the same time.

ARE THERE ANY PLACES THAT YOU JUST CAN'T GET TO IN CORNWALL - PLACES THAT NEED STARLINK FOR EXAMPLE?

There is a tiny handful; normally the challenges are human - accessing the land, for example. In a minority of areas and there are lots of different technologies you can use at the edges. This is where wireless or satellite technologies can have a part to play.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR TRAINING ACADEMY AND YOUR APPRENTICESHIP.

Our cohort of young apprentices are doing really well. There is a certain joy about a young open mind that wants to learn, wants to be the best they can be. They've got their whole career ahead of them. Doing something positive to help them get that first step on the ladder really matters.

We have had some older apprentices too, who are going back to work and want to be re-educated. We are supported by Truro and Penwith College in Bodmin who manage the programme for us, who leave me speechless at the quality work they do.

AND YOU'RE KEEPING PEOPLE IN THE AREA INSTEAD OF TAKING ON DEBT AT UNIVERSITY ELSEWHERE.

The impact of all this has been surprisingly rewarding. We found that subsequently other Cornish companies who are in a similar boat are also starting to think, right, we need engineers, we need to grow them ourselves. Cornwall could eventually end up being one of those places where good engineers come from.

IS THERE ANYTHING LEFT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE WITH WILDANET?

I've got a long list, and we are not done yet by any stretch of the imagination! I would like to leave us in a situation where we've got a really top-grade network that lasts for 40 years. I like to focus on doing one thing at a time well. Once we finish Cornwall, we'd like to consider extending our Devon network. I think the Tamar is ready for us to cross!

OTHER THAN GEOGRAPHY, WHAT ELSE ARE YOU LOOKING AT?

We've been helping people recycle kit back into the community under our Kit24 scheme. We pick unwanted business IT kit up from businesses, recondition it with our partners including The Good Things Foundation, strip it and send it back to the

people who need it. Most IT departments have cupboards full of stuff; in the UK we're one of the largest producers of this type of waste in the world.

We are also passionate about digital confidence, which is not so much about skills as it is about how you feel about using technology. When we're talking to customers, often they admit they are a little bit nervous, and it's normally around things like safety and parental controls. "Should I turn it off at night? How does it work?" There are different levels of understanding. It isn't age or education specific. People lack confidence in digital and I think increasingly that could hold us back as a country. How does confidence stop us all using this technology? Because people talk, for instance about AI or quantum telecommunications, these are big things, but if people aren't confident using them, don't understand them, they aren't going to take off.

PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW UNTIL YOU SHOW THEM THE WAY. EDUCATION AND CONFIDENCE TAKE PEOPLE TO NEW HEIGHTS AND THE SKY REALLY IS THE LIMIT.

<https://wildanet.com/>

