



CityFibre

Unplugged

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

Simon Holden, Group Chief Operating Officer at CityFibre chats to Broadband Journal about the company's achievements, its novel approach to staff retention and its technical and commercial vision for the 2030s.

Congratulations on your recent FTTH Operator Award, you must be delighted. Not the first time CityFibre have been recognised for their achievements, you're obviously very good at what you do. What is CityFibre doing that you think that sets the company apart?



Simon Holden,
COO, CityFibre

CityFibre has existed for 11 years now, much longer than some people realise. During that time, we have learned an enormous amount about designing citywide networks, about scaling our build and about collaborating with a wide range of partners.

This foundation has allowed us to grow at an extraordinary pace

and to deploy networks at scale that deliver our customers, and theirs, a radically improved service experience.

What's the latest state of play?

We're now fully financed to roll out to 8m homes across 285 cities towns and villages and we're fast approaching 2m

premises passed. We've also become the preferred network supplier to over 30 ISPs and MNOs, including Vodafone, TalkTalk, Zen and Three.

That's quite something considering you're only just past the 10-year mark and you have such competition in the market. What's your secret?

Our carrier-neutral wholesale model is introducing infrastructure choice to communication providers for the first time – and choosing a faster, more reliable and more economically attractive network is an easy choice to make!

Arguably the emergence of altnets has changed the landscape decisively and for the better. How much of CityFibre's success do you put down to good timing and spotting a great opportunity?

A full fibre future for the UK has always been inevitable and from the day we were founded, we have pursued a fibre-only strategy while the incumbents held on to the belief that copper would be good enough. Gradually we have seen them respond to the competitive threat that fibre builders like CityFibre represent.

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We've seen them perform handbrake turns and have now committed to full-fibre investments.

Other companies might treat such a u-turn as a serious threat.

Well yes, but the country is actually now seeing the benefits of that competitive landscape, as there has been a doubling of full-fibre coverage since the last General Election. The key now to unlocking further success is nurturing and protecting competition. This is where Ofcom is playing a pivotal role. Their forward-thinking strategy to generate competition in this market has been a success, but it would be wrong to say the job is done; they must help ensure that competition is protected and encouraged.

Training remains a hot topic; the recruiting and upskilling of engineers can't happen fast enough. How are you overcoming this as a company and how do you retain your staff?

CityFibre is a challenger brand with real purpose – to equip the UK with infrastructure for the data age. As such we provide an attractive opportunity for skilled people across our industry and beyond. We've grown rapidly as a business, nearly doubling in size in the last 18 months alone, and our people love working here, which is testament to the incredible culture at CityFibre that we're all so proud of.

What are you actually doing to that end?

Our people have helped us achieve some extraordinary things, but we are constantly looking at ways to enable them to enhance their skillset and capabilities. A great example is the CityFibre Planner Academy which is attracting young talent from across the UK and offering them the training and support to design the networks the UK will rely on for the next 100 years. At the same time, we know we have to take care of each other, and we have made mental health a priority focus. All of us have been under incredible strain during the pandemic

and the message right from the top is that people must put their mental well-being and family first. If that is in order, then it will take care of the work they are doing for CityFibre.

2030 is the target date for all homes to be deployed and you are clearly rolling out at an impressive pace. What plans does CityFibre have after that date?

Ultimately, we want to establish CityFibre as the UK's third national network and the largest independent Full Fibre platform. Our rollout is on track and we're still getting faster. We expect to substantially complete our 8m rollout by 2025, approximately a third of the market, and should we participate in BDUK's Project Gigabit, we could even exceed our 8m target.

Those are ambitious targets.

But this is not just about scale – it's about quality. Without the requirement to make concessions to legacy infrastructure, platforms, systems and products, we have a unique opportunity to design a network capable of delivering a vastly improved service experience, offering customers better products at better prices. This is what we call being 'better by design' and it's working. More and more communication providers are choosing CityFibre and more consumers and businesses are choosing them as a result. Best of all, by raising the bar, we are encouraging investment and innovation across the industry which can only benefit us all.

A rising tide lifts all boats, that's very true. Very admirable. Nobody saw Covid coming, and Brexit has thrown a few curveballs at us as well; we are living in unpredictable times. How does CityFibre handle disruptors as a company? How agile are you and what would you do differently now that we are - more or less - out the other side of Covid?

While we're growing fast, we are still a lean business and have, by necessity, always been an agile one. With a

100% commitment on full-fibre as a technology, no legacy infrastructure or products and a wholesale model, we can stay focused on what matters and adapt quickly to change. A great example of this was the speed with which we responded to Covid, set up our workforce to work remotely and at the same time, increased our rate of build, taking full advantage of the empty streets to accelerate our rollout. We also managed to nearly double our workforce over the period, onboarding nearly 900 new staff into roles across our organisation.

It's great to hear how companies responded to the pandemic – how they turned a crisis into an opportunity – we saw that a lot in the early days. Well done. What about the landscape now? Often in business, as things are peaking, there is a period of investment, intense competition followed by consolidation amongst companies. Do you see a period of consolidation for the altnets in time? How do you see the landscape in 5- or 10-years' time?

Doubtlessly there will be consolidation in the market over time, but what the past few years have taught us is that it is very hard to predict anything with any degree of certainty.

What we do firmly believe is that the UK needs a third national network if we are to ensure a healthy competitive market for the long term. The duopoly model failed and resulted in the UK lagging behind much of the rest of Europe. Competition has turned this around and has unleashed vast sums of private investment to level up the UK's connectivity. If we continue to protect and nurture that competition, we will unleash a spectacular digital dividend for the nation.



For more information, visit www.cityfibre.com



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