

# Plans for an Island-Wide Fibre-Optic Cable Network Being Developed Now

Last Friday SHG announced a UK business has been chosen as the preferred bidder for St Helena's telecom services as the contract with Sure comes to a close and the superfast Equiano cable enters the final stages of being fully connected and operational.

Maestro Technologies, based in Central London, has been chosen to take forward plans to install an entirely new telecom network across the Island. It will be a fibre-optic network. The aim is to provide superfast broadband speeds across the whole network if possible.

The day after the announcement a survey team from Maestro arrived at the airport; the day after that (Sunday) they were busy checking out Half Tree Hollow and other urban areas to get an understanding of what will be involved in the planned work.

Maestro Technologies describe themselves as a management company specialising in developing telecom and IT projects, with special focus on fibre deployments, mobile services and advanced corporate connectivity projects. We have a team with over 35 years of experience in Broadband technologies, investment management and project management, with vast knowledge of Europe, Middle East and Asia. Maestro are specialists in optical communications, FTTP (residential fibre to premises) and mobile convergence access solutions (removing difficulties in linking different communication technologies).

SHG received three bids when the invitation for tenders closed on 10<sup>th</sup> June. Exactly three months later Maestro Technologies was chosen through the evaluation process as the preferred bidder and people from Maestro are here to make the first detailed assessment before starting plans for the installation of the fibre-optic cable network.

Mark Brooks, Minister for Sustainable Development, told the *Independent* Maestro has installed many fibre-optic networks before including to 150,000 homes in the UK. They have also completed similar work on islands very similar to what is required for St Helena. Some of the islands have also had difficult terrain, much like St Helena's ridges and guts. All of this helped to choose Maestro as the preferred bidder.

Sure St Helena has installed a fibre 'spine' to the island's network. Maestro may consider using some of this cable which is already laid if it fits with their own plans and specifications. At the start, the assumption is that the Maestro network will be all new.

The minister emphasised that preferred bidder status is the just the start. Surveys will indicate how much work is involved and the equipment required. When this done some detailed estimates of cost can be pulled together. Out of all of that there will be choices to be made on slightly different ways to complete certain stages of the work. Each different way will have a different cost, different benefits and disbenefits. All ways need to be assessed against each other and final choices made.

Throughout the detailed planning and costing stages the decisions will be guided by basic principles. Mark Brooks pointed out the new fibre-optic network needs to be affordable and available. The monthly bills to customers need to be less than they are now. Connections need to be reliable and faster than they are now. Ensuring these aims are satisfactorily achieved is the main reason it has taken so long to select a preferred bidder though the tender process.

In addition to fibre-optic replacing copper wire to carry the data much faster, another main difference is the government will own the fibre-optic network, not the telecom services provider. The tender process for a telecom service provider will start after the contract to provide the new fibre Island network is signed together with the contract to connect all premises, residential and commercial, to the network. It may be that every building is physically connected by cable to the Island network. A possible alternative is to link sparsely populated areas to the network by radio signal. This alternative will not reduce the data speed compared with a full fibre connection.

With the government owning the Island network, the selected telecom service provider will only be directly responsible for the link from the network to telecom equipment within each house or business and the broadband, telephone, television and mobile services the telecom services provider offers to each residential or business property. The government will be responsible for maintaining the Island network but intend to contract out the maintenance work to a telecom company. It may prove the most efficient, practical and cheapest way is to give the maintenance of the Island network to the telecom services provider. As the work progresses through the various stages it will become clearer whether this arrangement for maintaining the network is the best option.

Sure's licence to provide telecom services has been extended by 12 months from its original termination date of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2022. There is much to be done before the big switchover to fibre-optic connections on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024.

Also getting ever closer to conclusion is the preparatory work required before OneWeb can start building their Space Park at Horse Point. Space Park is OneWeb's name for a ground station linking satellite signals with Trans-Atlantic cables. OneWeb's Space Park and other similar high capacity data users are needed for the revenue they will contribute to the overall telecom organisational and operational structures being developed based on the opportunities which are opening up due to the Equiano cable connection.

