

Superfast Broadband – Where are we today?

RECAP

Our drive to get a broadband community fibre scheme implemented was started in January 2021- more than 18 months ago! We scoped out a scheme that included 392 homes / premises, geographically spread across Ashburnham, Penhurst and the northern edges of Ninfield.

After the challenges of getting a 'Final Offer' from Openreach for the cost to build infrastructure and the related approval from the Department of Culture/ Media/Sport (DCMS) to allow the use Rural Gigabit Vouchers (RGV) to fund the scheme, we were able to open up for RGV pledging on 19 February 2022. The normal pledging window is 3 months and so the aim was to get enough pledges to reach the cost target by 19 May.

PLEDGING: How did we do?

Pledging was very slow to gain momentum and by mid May we had stagnated with pledges valued at circa 40% of the cost target. The pledging window was thus extended to mid of July, by which time the pledged amount had reached just 48% of target and was by then not changing at all. It had become quite clear that we had no chance to reach the target.

ANALYSIS: Who pledged?

In order to better understand the pattern of pledging and to see where there had been poor and good traction, we asked Openreach to share the demographics of who had pledged. See results below:-

	Total Premises	Pledges received	Hit rate %
Ninfield	263	29	11%
Ash & Pen	129	64	50%

The above is an absolute count of pledges. In monetary terms the results are further tilted in favour towards Ashburnham and Penhurst because most of the higher value business vouchers that were pledged were in our parishes.

REMODELLED SCHEME: A possible solution?

We asked Openreach to remodel our scheme by extracting the Ninfield properties from it, thereby removing the costs associated with building infrastructure for them.

An initial estimate for a remodelled scheme was received recently on 09 August. It embraces only 84 properties in Ashburnham and Penhurst. At first glance this may seem a small number given that the original scheme had 129

properties for our parishes. However, since we started this whole process 8 months ago, there have been a number of individual upgrades across the parish. This has come as a pleasant surprise (albeit it is once again mysterious how such things can occur seemingly unnoticed!). A list of the lucky ones will be published shortly.

The remodelled scheme has a cost of £213,000 (our original scheme with Ninfield was going to cost £475,000). The pledge target for the remodelled scheme would in theory again be “Cost plus 30%” ie £277,000, equivalent to £3300 per property. With the good mix that we have of higher value business vouchers and East Sussex top-up, it means that such a pledge target would be just (barely just!) reachable.

NEXT HURDLES: More trouble ahead!

In offering us a remodelled scheme, Openreach have without any prior discussion changed their approach and reverted us to an offer for a classic Fibre Community Partnership. This would require that every property sign an individual contract. We know from experience that this simply will not be acceptable to the community. Thus, unless Openreach revert us back to a Demand Lead scheme (as we had right from the start) then we will reluctantly have to declare it closed. The end of the road will have been reached. Openreach have therefore been requested to keep us on a Demand Lead scheme – response awaited.

Even if the above request is successful, we will have to wait until early January before we can gain access to our RGVs. This is because the DCMS have imposed a freeze on releasing vouchers for a period of 6 months from 14 July 2022. This is because they want to take stock of what parts of the country remain without superfast broadband and have further rounds of central procurement on-going (wherein the DCMS contracts directly with infrastructure builders like Openreach).

CONCLUSION: Where does all this leave us?

There are now 3 possible outcomes that can be imagined. They are:-

- Our remodelled scheme gets approved as a “Demand Lead” scheme, we reach the pledge target, vouchers get released by DCMS in January 2023 and build is completed by December 2023.
- Our scheme does not go ahead but new builds driven from central government result in us getting upgraded by osmosis. Timeline 18-36 months.
- New technology emerges that gives a economically viable alternative to fibre broadband. Timeline – unknown.

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