

Suffolk Better Broadband Programme: Position Statement and Briefing Summer 2016



Purpose

Following a number of recent discussions about the status of the Suffolk Better Broadband Programme, this briefing seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the current status of the Programme.

Context

Commercially funded broadband coverage originally reached around 50% of the premises in Suffolk (~175,000 premises). Beyond this, no commercial case existed for operators to extend superfast broadband beyond 50% into some of the most rural areas in Suffolk. Through 2012-2015, SCC used public funding (£22m) to extend this 50% to 85% via the BDUK Rural Broadband Programme. Work was completed on the first contract ahead of target in September 2015. It was also under budget, and over delivered (an additional 105,000 premises compared to ~100,000 premises targeted).

Conscious that stopping at 85% would still leave a digital divide in Suffolk, SCC and New Anglia LEP committed further funding (£15m matched by £15m from BDUK) in late 2014, and were the first county nationally to commit to at least 97% coverage by 2019, under the BDUK Superfast Extension Programme (SEP). The SEP, also referred to as the “second contract”, was signed in October 2014. This included a contractual commitment to fully model the coverage under the second contract by October 2015, and in doing so, present to SCC a deployment plan to reach 95% by 2018. In December 2015, directly after the completion of Contract 1, SCC announced and commenced the first phase of build under the second contract.

Alongside the second contract, December 2015 also saw the launch of an Infill Scheme. This targeted those receiving speeds of less than 2Mbps and not scheduled for fibre upgrade in the next 12 months. The offer was satellite broadband to work alongside the fibre deployment plan for the next 12-15 months. This was in order that communities could make informed decisions regarding interim solutions, based on having visibility of the fibre rollout plan.

Progress To Date

The first contract reached over 105,000 premises, and as of June 2016 we have completed around 8,000 premises under the second contract, bringing the total to nearly 115,000 premises upgraded to date, which, together with the commercial coverage, is around 87% coverage of the county (~305,000 premises). 33% of these premises have taken up services, which means around 35,000 Suffolk premises are now enjoying superfast broadband as a result of the public investment. Without this, they would not have this opportunity.

The second contract is comprised of eight phases. This first and second phases are [shared on the website map](#), and also covered in the latest newsletter. This information, along with past newsletters and other useful information, is on the www.betterbroadbandsuffolk.com. The remaining six phases of the second contract will be announced individually at the start of each phase at what is known as ‘Milestone Zero’, which is as soon as the phase is planned and the survey completed, meaning a level of certainty exists about which areas will make up each phase. This is explained further below.

Fluidity and Phasing

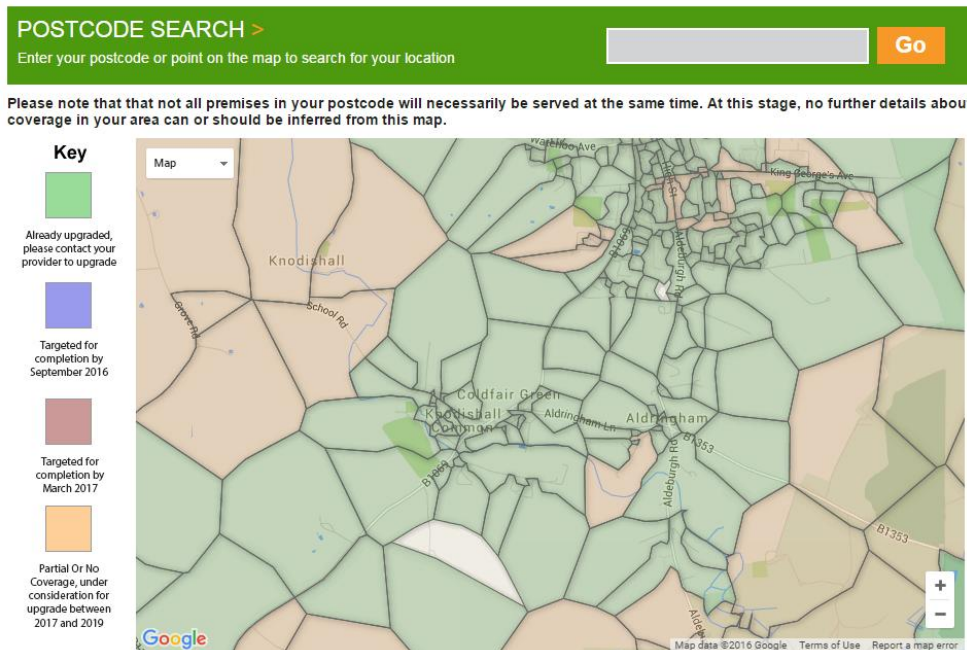
The programme for the second contract is very fluid and there is a strong chance that upgrades will be pulled forwards and backwards from the originally contracted plan – this is to our benefit as it ensures the best possible coverage figures through the best use of technology and best use of money.

BT are required to hit strict contractual milestones relating to building and commissioning the network. Each milestone or phase requires a number of premises to be upgraded. Whilst a general view of the broad areas which these will fall in exists, it is not until the survey phase at the beginning of each milestone that we know precisely

what the build will include. For example, if a survey uncovers an issue, that area may have to fall back to a later milestone, and another one might need to be fast tracked into an earlier milestone. The “net” outcome to date is that we have not yet had to de-scope a single area from the second contract, albeit there is some “shuffling” of areas back and forth as required from an engineering perspective. This will become more and more relevant in the second contract; so it is harder to forecast with certainty when an area will be upgraded. Therefore, whilst the broad target is a particular phase, there is a chance of this coming forwards or backwards, for these reasons.

Each 3-6 months we will publicise the latest build list and update the website in order that it can be tracked and shared as best as possible. A tangible example of this is the content of phase 2, where almost 75% of the planned upgrade areas were pushed backwards, with other areas being accelerated, largely due to the nature of the technology being used in that particular phase.

This poses communication challenges, as it is not until the beginning of each phase when we are able to definitively announce new areas for upgrades, and this happens with a new announcement every three months. It is however a very positive thing for Suffolk, as it is the process whereby the rollout is continually re-modelled to maximise the use of new technologies, better deployment methods, and ultimately to give more coverage for less funding. An example of the impact of this is the first contract, where improvements of around 20% were realised through optimising the scheduling on a phased basis; better value for money, but a communications challenge nonetheless.



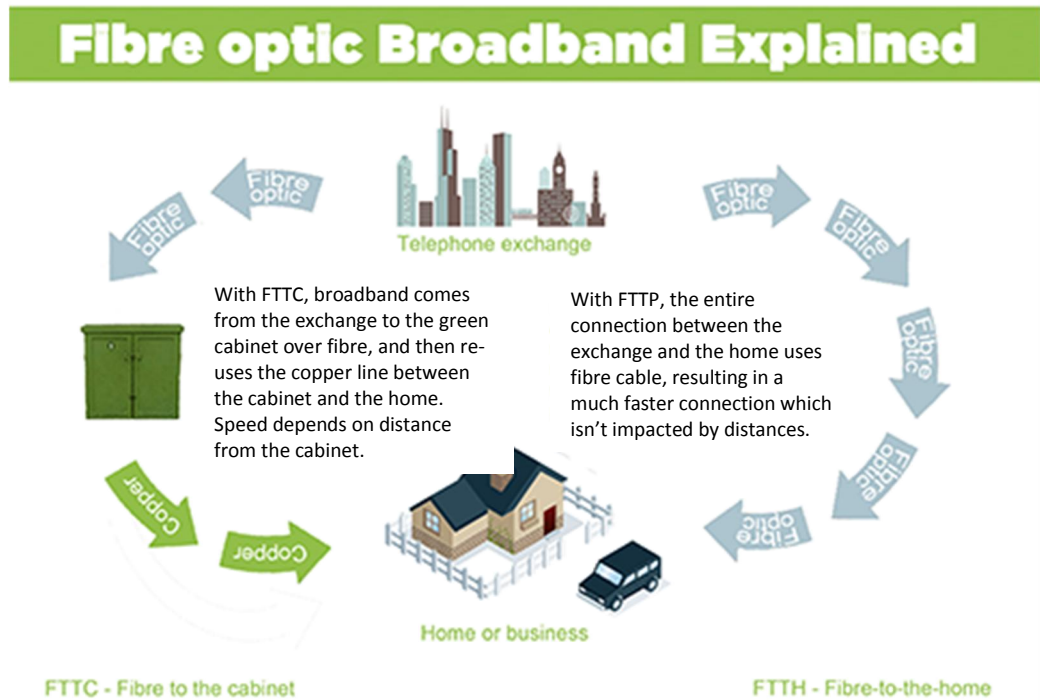
Future Plans

We are around 6 years into a 10 year programme to reach 100% of premises in Suffolk. Previous SCC Cabinets have committed to reaching 100% by 2020. Contractual commitments are in place with BT to get to around 98% by 2019 and there are various factors and initiatives that will help further increase coverage, but there are not contractual arrangements in place at this time. Current discussions and developments include:

- Superfast Broadband is identified as a priority in the Norfolk and Suffolk Devolution Deal and it is possible that money from the Single Pot could be used to support this ambition;
- Government announced that they are exploring the possibility of a 10Mbps Universal Service Obligation by 2020. There is no clear information or funding about how this might work, and it is likely to only be fully scoped (via additional consultation) by the end of the current parliament;
- Additional monies may be “clawed back” from BT due to high take-up under the existing contracts, and could be used to extend coverage slightly further; and
- The re-modelling involved in planning each phase of the second contract should introduce improvements and efficiencies to improve the contracted outcomes further.

Infill Scheme and Alternative Options

For those who are more than 12 months away from having fibre, and currently get less than 2Mbps, we are offering vouchers to assist with interim solutions. These originally covered the installation cost of satellite broadband. Recently, the Scheme has been extended to include accredited community Wi-Fi providers, if an operator is available in that area. This is not billed as a perfect solution, it is infill, and does have limitations (hence the long-term fibre rollout programme), but it does present a usable option for basic internet and email access. With satellite broadband, the vouchers do not cover the monthly charges for services, and charges can get high if a lot of data is used each month.



Support for Members and Communities

The programme should be seen as a huge success - it is a national leader, and has beaten all of the targets we signed up for contractually as a result of government policy. It has the highest levels of take-up nationally and other areas are yet to complete the tender process for their second contracts.

However, for those 10-15% of Suffolk premises who are yet to benefit, it remains frustrating. The fluidity of the survey and planning stage of each Phase and hence inability to offer a definitive long term rollout plan adds to this uncertainty and frustration. To help combat this, a range of support options are on offer:

- Regular newsletters, tables listing areas live and planned and a postcode level phase map are all provided, but do only give a definitive picture of completed areas, areas currently in delivery and then those planned for a single phase ahead. A dedicated email service has been set up (broadband@suffolk.gov.uk) which handles many public queries a week. Those queries will, in future, all be copied to the relevant local member for their visibility.
- Members, individuals and organisations such as Parish Councils can contact the Programme Team on the address above and ask specific questions and the Programme Team will turn around queries very quickly. It needs to be recognised that these questions will always be answered based on the best information available at the time – sometimes this means that the answer will not necessarily be what communities want to hear.
- A dedicated Community Broadband Member Group was established and has met at regular intervals to focus on specific developments in the Programme. A new regular, monthly, update meeting is planned, open to all members to attend. This will meet at 2pm on the second Wednesday of each month from 14th Sept.
- Community Meetings can be offered, but will only add value (and represent a sensible use of resources) if there is unique news to give an area. At the beginning of each phase, an area could be briefed on the plans and timescales for their community, exploring opportunities for further improving the planned coverage, managing road closures, wayleaves or any other local issues.
- Community Dig and an emerging “Fibre to the Farm” idea are also initiatives which can be investigated. This is where communities can support the rollout by carrying out some works locally. The programme team are very happy to hear about potential use cases for this, and they should be flagged to the dedicated inbox.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this briefing provides you with the information you need to understand the current position and workings of the Suffolk Better Broadband. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact broadband@suffolk.gov.uk or Jane.storey@Suffolk.gov.uk