

## Broadwas and Cotheridge Parish Council

Report for meeting of Parish Council 8th March 2021

Re: Community Fibre Partnership

Purpose of report: To update councillors on current position and progress.

**Background:** The Parish Council is acting as the Community Fibre Partnership in the context of the central government initiative to bring full fibre broadband connections to rural areas. This scheme is led locally by Worcestershire County Council and Open Reach. As the CFP the Parish Council acts as “legal entity” and facilitates the bringing together of local residents/businesses in being made aware of the scheme. The scheme requires local residents and businesses to express an interest and enter into an agreement with OpenReach and ultimately the Department of Culture, Media and Sports who provide the funding in the form of vouchers for each resident/business who signs up.

A scheme can only proceed when there is sufficient interest i.e. residents/businesses who are prepared to sign up so as to allow draw down of vouchers that cover the cost of installation. Once this threshold is reached those who have signed up agree with OpenReach/DCMS that they will once the new connections are installed take up the relevant full fibre service from their service provider for 12 months.

Worcester County Council recognised that it was often hard to attract sufficient interest from rural areas and as a result last year introduced a “top up scheme” which in effect can double the value of the vouchers. This has been particularly helpful with our scheme(s).

The benefits of a full fibre connection i.e. fibre that replaces the copper connection that runs from the exchange cabinet to the house or business, opens up volume and speed, which means a faster, more reliable connection that can cope with a higher level of demand and usage. This is particularly relevant in rural areas, as copper connections have limited capacity and tend to become slower the greater the distance they cover. A fibre connection means that there is direct and full fibre access to the Superfast fibre national network.

The cost of installing a full fibre connection for most people would be prohibitive, so the value of this scheme is that the whole cost of installation to all premises in the parish is met from government funding.

The current scheme ends in March 2021 and it is uncertain whether future schemes will prioritise rural areas in the same way as the present one does or when any replacement scheme would come into effect. The Parish schemes are we are advised safeguarded as they were started and accepted as a part of the present scheme. However, we were advised recently that we needed to complete all stages of the process before the end of March in order for this to be maintained.

## **Where we are now**

As advised in previous reports 2 of the 4 schemes (Cotheridge/Church Lane and Little Green) met the funding threshold with some assistance from the WCC Top Up Scheme. Those residents and businesses who signed up are awaiting contact from DCMS to ask them to confirm their agreement so that the vouchers can be released to OpenReach. Once this has happened OpenReach will then set a start and a completion date (usually within 12 months of the start date). All those who signed up have been made aware and support has been offered.

Broadwas village, which is the largest scheme with potentially 121 premises, has as previously reported been more difficult to find support from. However in the past six weeks thanks in no small amount to the efforts of a couple of parishioners, has now met the funding threshold. This means that the scheme will be submitted to WCC (in terms of eligibility for the Top Up Scheme) and then to OpenReach/DCMS. Once this is confirmed we will notify all those who have signed up.

The 4th and smallest scheme has yet to reach the threshold, and has been subject to some revisions by OpenReach which means that addresses from outside of the parish have been added. WCC have agreed to take on this scheme and we will help out as requested. At the time of writing its future is not known

## **Summary and next steps**

In terms of 3 of the 4 schemes it now looks as if these are well on the way towards having a start and completion date set. This will be a significant achievement for the Parish and all premises will benefit from a full fibre broadband service. This will add value to property prices, support local businesses and those who work from home and enable all to be future proofed as and when the use of the internet remains and continues to be important.

As the Community Fibre Partnership the Parish Council needs to be aware that there are a number of identified risks, where upon further facilitation may be required. These are at the point when DCMS contacts those who have signed up and anyone changes their mind, and when the service goes live and any of those who signed up decide not to take up the service for 12 months as per their agreement with OpenReach.

In terms of the first risk, we will need to be prepared to solicit further support to replace any “losses” in terms of those who signed up i.e identify replacement residents/businesses.

In terms of the second risk, it is understood that this would primarily be a matter between OpenReach, DCMS and the individual/business concerned.

We are exploring with the WCC team a shared approach to managing any risk and see our role as “facilitator” rather than holding any specific responsibility or liability. This accords with the information and advice we have been provided with by WCC.

**Councillors are asked to note the report and raise any questions.**

Richard Burrows  
4.3.21