April 2022

Dear Resident

**BIDDENDEN/ THREE CHIMNEYS RURAL BROADBAND UPDATE**

Firstly, we hope you and your families are all coping well within these challenging times.

**Do you want better Broadband?**

If the answer to this question is **“yes,”** then please read our **short summary** on the latest developments. You need only to browse through this section. However, if you wish to dive deeper into the details, then please read the more expansive comments.

**SHORT SUMMARY SECTION**

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| **1/ What’s happened to the local Broadband scheme that was originally set up in 2020?*** Unfortunately, this stalled due to a few factors:
* Openreach made an error in respect of the exact properties included within the scheme.
* Angus Buchanan, who led the scheme, sadly passed away in a tragic accident.

**2/ Any further developments since then?*** A small residents committee was formed to re-establish the scheme in the Autumn of 2021.
* We received a new offer from Openreach, £421.073, across 205 properties, to install the high-speed broadband.
* We had hoped that a combination of national and local government grants would fully fund this cost.
* In March of this year, we were informed that 80k of these costs would not be covered by the grants due to excessive build cost elements.
* Thus, we would need to self-fund this 80k sum in order to proceed with the scheme.
* However, the government grant scheme has now temporarily paused, so we find ourselves back to square one.

**3/ Are you still interested in being part of a future scheme?*** We still believe it is worthwhile to battle on and to attempt to establish a new scheme, after all, high-speed internet access is increasingly becoming a daily necessity, rather than a luxury item.
* So, we are looking to gauge your willingness to be part of this project.

If you are interested, then we need to hear from you by **Friday May 31st** at the latest. |

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| **4/ What action is required from you?*** We have designed a small website that you can access at [www.BiddendenRuralBroadband.co.uk](http://www.BiddendenRuralBroadband.co.uk) to make it as easy as possible for you to provide us with relevant information.
* You can enter all your basic details here, e.g., name/address/email/ whether you are purely a residential address or have a business registered at the property.
* There will also be a ‘tick-box’ where you can indicate your desire to contribute to any self-funding element of a future scheme (there is no firm commitment from you at this stage)
* Any details you enter will all be ‘safe and secure,’ e.g., no data sold on to third party companies, all info held on a secure server**.**

**5/ What happens after we have collected all the data?*** The committee will spend the next 6 months working with Openreach to design a new rural broadband scheme.
* We will have an updated list of properties and fully understand how many residential and businesses want to participate.
* We will seek to minimise or even remove any self-funded element of the build costs.
* We will be in a ‘good place’ when the new national funding scheme re-opens in October.
* We will, of course, not contact you further if we do not hear anything from you by 31st May.

**That’s it! We will, of course keep you fully updated on our progress.** |

**Would you like to know about more of the ‘detailed stuff?’ If so, then please read on.**

**EXTENDED NOTES SECTION**

Many of you may recollect that Angus Buchanan set up a local initiative to bring fast speed broadband to our community.

Angus worked incredibly energetically to both design and apply for one of the government’s ‘Rural Community Fibre’ schemes that would allow us to access both national and local government grants in order to fund the infrastructure that Openreach would install to make this a reality.

We were on the verge of getting this scheme fully approved in 2020 when unfortunately, and rather sadly, events conspired against us- Openreach made a mistake on the addresses included within our application, which stalled the project, and then Angus sadly passed away in a tragic accident.

Across the Autumn of 2021 we sought to re-establish the project, both in honour of Angus’s sterling efforts, and the growing frustration of most of us experiencing extremely low broadband speeds, often less than 3Mbps. (Barely warranting a ‘broadband’ label).

**What’s the latest updates since then?**

We subsequently formed a small committee, chaired by Gary Knight, to steer us through the rather complex process ahead.

We were making good progress, even receiving an offer from Openreach (in February of this year) for the sum of £421,073 to install the scheme across 205 properties. We later discovered that this was the same quote as the one Angus received in October 2020.

However, we soon bore witness to the rather tricky world of applying for and receiving government grants.

We envisaged that the scheme would be self-funded by the two principal grants in play:

* National Government, via the DCMS office (Dept of Culture, Media & Sport), that would allow us to access ‘vouchers’ to the sum of £1500 per residential household, and £3500 per business registered at a property.
* Further £1000 local government top-up voucher via Kent County Council.

We asked Openreach to apply for our scheme to receive approval from DCMS for these vouchers, whilst KCC quickly confirmed that their vouchers were fully approved for us.

In March we received the bad news that although DCMS would potentially offer us ‘vouchers’, they deemed that £80,000 of the quoted £421,000 would not be covered by grants. In effect this would mean that our community would have to privately fund this cost, even though the remaining costs were likely to be covered by the grants.

**Why was this 80k specifically excluded?**

Apparently, this is due to parts of the technical build cost, especially the costs of the ‘spine.’

Without diving too deep into the details of this element, it relates to some of the ‘junctures’ that connect the fibre lines from the exchange to various parts of our community.

It would appear that given our proposed scheme is quite extensive in terms of geographical spread, the spine build costs are quite expensive, and DCMS voucher grants will not cover this build element as it is deemed as ‘excessive costs.’

The committee decided to appeal, at the highest level against this decision. We subsequently contacted the Chief Exec of Openreach, our two local MPs (Damian Green and Helen Grant), and Nadine Dorries, Secretary of State at the DCMS.

Sadly, we were not successful in reversing this decision.

At this juncture we were minded to contact all residents to ask if you might be prepared to contribute your own funds to bridge this 80k gap. However, the current DCMS voucher grants temporarily closed on April 6th, 2022, thus there was insufficient time for us to contact you all, seek your desire to self-fund the said element, apply to DCMS for the vouchers and have this all approved within an extremely tight deadline.

Hence, we decided this was not a realistic course of action.

**Where does this leave us now?**

As previously stated, the DCMS have temporarily halted their voucher grants for a six-month period (should be reinstated in October 2022). There are a couple of factors behind this:

* This allows DCMS to determine how they have spent the previous vouchers and determine what the budget for the next voucher scheme should be.
* They will review, and later announce, those areas that are next on the list to benefit from the roll-out of high-speed broadband under the government’s ‘Project Gigabyte’ scheme.

This scheme is part of the commitment to provide 85% of the UK with FTTP (fibre to the premises) broadband connections. It is classified as a ‘commercial programme,’ i.e., funded by government, nothing to do with DCMS voucher grants.

**Would our community be part of this Project Gigabyte Initiative?**

Well, we have some ‘known news,’ as well as some ‘unknown news.’

* Openreach recently announced that the Biddenden exchange will be one of the Kent villages that will benefit from the commercial FTTP programme.
* However, we currently have no known date when this work will be carried out. It could be in 2026, or it might take until 2028- we just do not have a date yet.
* Even when this build is completed up to 25% of properties may still not benefit from the upgrade (those that are deemed as ‘too rural/too expensive’ to connect.
* We do not know if Biddenden will be one of the villages outlined as ‘next in line’ when the DCMS make their announcement in October of this year.

**What short-term options lie ahead?**

* We could wait until October & see if our community is included within the list of areas that will benefit from the commercial Project Gigabyte scheme.
* If we are not included, then we could simply sit back and wait until the Biddenden Exchange is upgraded, but this might not be until 2028 (and we would have to hope our individual property does not fall into the 25% exclusion zone).
* Whilst both options exist, we could also be proactive within the next six months to give ourselves alternative options.

**Designing a potentially new RCF (Rural Community Fibre Scheme)**

We would like you to consider helping us to design a new RCF scheme that could be viable if we are not included within the October 2022 commercial Project Gigabyte list.

We would suggest the following course of actions:

* Collect updated data in terms of properties and residents of such properties (the last data collection was 2 years ago, and things may have changed since then, people moving etc).
* Determine if your address is classified as residential or business. The more businesses in our scheme the better, e.g., higher voucher grant funding. The good news is that the DCMS’s definition of a qualifying business now includes registered business premises (farms, factories, shops, etc), any address with a limited company registered to it, any freelancers/sole traders who predominantly work from home (given the uplift of people working from home during the COVID pandemic, then there could be lots of businesses in this respect).
* Understand your desire to contribute an element of self-funding (either as an individual or business) in the scenario where we establish a new RCF, but still are not fully funded by voucher grants. We obviously cannot confirm at this moment in time what the overall self-funding might be, but we will understand this in more detail once we have redesigned the scheme. Thus, we are not asking you for any ‘firm’ commitment in respect of this element at the present time, simply your willingness to contribute. The potential cost per household/business will be shared and explained to you at the earliest possible instance, at which point we will ask you to make a firmer commitment.
* To help make the process of collecting this data as easy as possible, we have built a very simple website [www.BiddendenRuralBroadband.co.uk](http://www.BiddendenRuralBroadband.co.uk) that will allow you to input your details.

We will only collect very basic data details, i.e., your name, address, whether you are classified as residential or business, and your desire to contribute towards any self-funding. Please be assured that all this data will be secure and held within the governments GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) policy. Thus, we will not share your data with any third-party companies, we will keep it on a secure server, and destroy all data once our scheme project is either completed or abandoned.

* If you feel uncomfortably inputting your data on the website, then you can always email the details to our Chairman, Gary Knight, on givesse@mac.com (the same GDPR positions will apply).
* We would ask you to complete your data by Friday 31st May 2022. If we do not receive any info from you by then we will assume you have no interest in joining a new RCF scheme.

**What happens after the data collection period?**

We will work with Openreach and KCC to redesign an RCF scheme.

We will try to understand the implications of the ‘spine costs,’ and seek to minimise these within any new/redesigned scheme.

Given we now have six months to work on this, then this will hopefully allow us quality time to thoroughly investigate this option.

We will, of course, keep you regularly updated on our progress.

We know that this has been a long and highly frustrating process. However, it is a prize worth pursuing as we are all increasingly reliant on high-speed internet access to participate in modern life- bill paying, online shopping, Zoom calls, house prices etc, etc.

Finally, apologies for the length of this note, but as you can appreciate there are lots of complex issues involved.

Many Thanks

North Biddenden/3 Chimneys RCF Committee

Gary Knight (Chair), Corrine Weaver, Paul Hopper, Gareth Brown, Simon Long, Kevin Rampling, Noel Lindsay, Jerry Slinn, Robert Lewis, Jerry Furley, Roland Rosner