

FTTP 4 Alresford

**Response to the
Public Review
Request for Information
Project Gigabit**

Hampshire and Isle of Wight

1 September 2021

About this Response

This submission has been prepared by FTTP 4 Alresford in response to BDUK's Request for Information (RFI) as part of the public review process (19th August 2021 to 20th September 2021) for Project Gigabit - Hampshire and Isle of Wight.

FTTP 4 Alresford is an informal campaign group bringing together residents, and the local Town, City and County Councillors with the aim of improving broadband infrastructure in New Alresford, Hampshire. The group has no corporate structure and works by consensus based decision making. There is close co-operation with similar groups in the villages around Alresford.

The campaign website may be found at <https://fttp4alresford.uk>

The status of this submission is thus that of a submission from a residents group, and has been compiled by the campaign co-ordinator.

The Purpose of our Submission

The purpose of this submission is to inform the DCMS and BDUK of the information learnt by the group about the local area, its broadband infrastructure and the attitude of residents towards both broadband itself and issues involved in broadband rollout. It is hoped that this information will be of use in planning the rollout of broadband under Project Gigabit, both in Hampshire and other areas.

In May/June 2021, a group of residents and councillors conducted the door-to-door canvassing of over 370 properties in Alresford as part of a campaign to request Gigabit Voucher funding in the South East Alresford area. Residents were also asked to complete an online form as part of a request that a Gigabit Voucher Request be submitted on their behalf. Aggregate data for both of these initiatives is provided below, along with some conclusions and recommendations.

The response starts with a description of the Alresford area and its current broadband infrastructure.

Contact Information

As requested by the RFI, the following contact information is provided:

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New Alresford

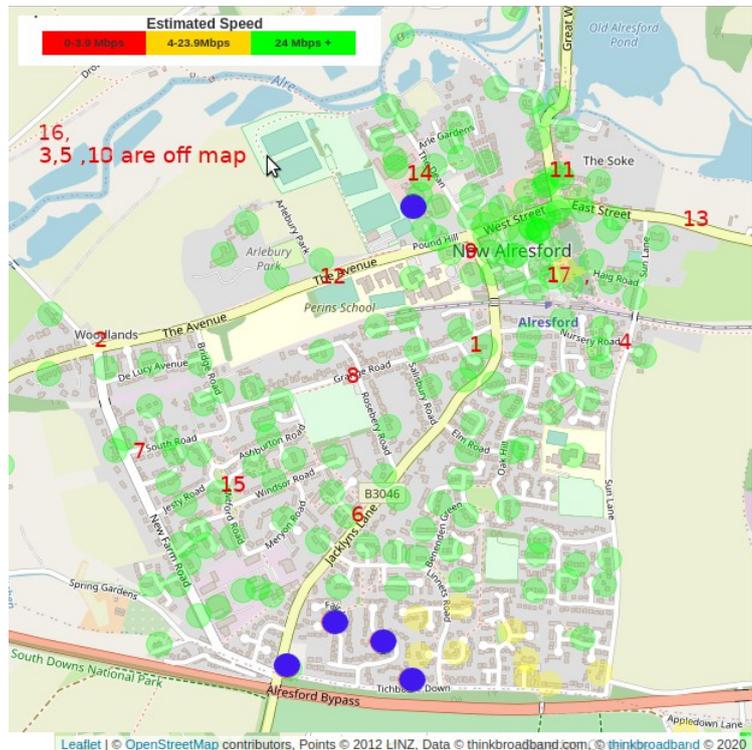
New Alresford (or just Alresford to its residents) is a market town and parish and is part of the City of Winchester. The town itself is 7.5 miles/12 km north east of Winchester and 12 miles/20 km west of Alton. Its population is approximately 5,500. The town centre dates back to medieval times, while the built-up area was extended significantly to the south in the latter part of the 20th Century.

Broadband Infrastructure

Eighteen BT Cabinets were identified in Alresford [2] as part of the Hampshire Superfast Broadband program and with fifteen of them being upgraded to support FTTC. The locations of most of these are shown on the town map to the right by plotting each cabinet number (in red) on the map. The remaining cabinets are in outlying villages.

The distribution of the cabinets appears to follow the outline of the built-up area in the 1960s, and most properties in that area are within 150 metres of a BT Cabinet. Broadband speeds in this area are good and typically greater than 50Mb/s.

Older properties are served by overhead telephone lines, while underground cables are used for the remainder.



The town was expanded significantly in the 1970s and 1980s to the south of Jacklyns Lane and west of Sun Lane. However, the BT Cabinet locations remained the same. Telephone lines for the new housing were run from Cabinet 6 on the western side of the new build area and from Cabinet 4 on the eastern side. The lines from Cabinet 4 are much longer than in the rest of the town and extend down Sun Lane and Tichborne Down to the Linnets Road (South) area. That is up to 1.5km in length.

Cabinet 4 also serves two Mobile Phone masts on White Hill Lane to the East of the town and properties to the south of the A31 Alresford Bypass.

Broadband speeds in the South East area range from less than 9Mbps/s at the western extremity to just below 30Mbps/s at the northern end.

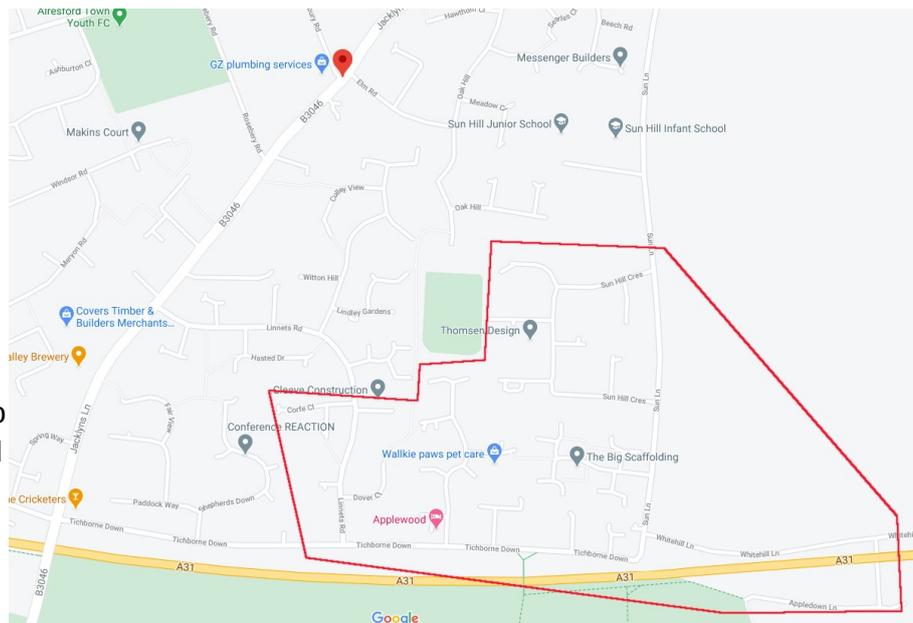
As part of the Superfast broadband programme, some properties in SO24 9PL, SO24 9PN, SO24 9PP, SO24 9PR and SO24 9QA (show as blue discs in the south west area) were upgraded to Full Fibre Communications. This has resulted in the awkward situation where properties who back on to each other can have very different broadband speeds (e.g. up to 900Mb/s in SO24 9PP and less than 9 Mb/s in SO24 9PH).

There are also some properties in the north west side of the town (e.g. SO24 9FT) with Full Fibre. However, the reason why they were upgraded is unknown.

A further anomaly is Bakeland Gardens (SO24 9QX). This is a new build (~ 2014) sandwiched between the A31 Alresford Bypass and Spring Gardens in the South West of the town. However, it is formally outside of the New Alresford parish boundary and part of the Tichborne Parish, and is hence not within the remit of most of our local councillors. Properties here are connected to the BT Cabinet 16 (well off the map in Tichborne) and are restricted to less than 5.5 Mb/s. Literally across the road (SO24 9QA) full fibre is available.

The South East Alresford Scheme

The FTTP 4 Alresford Campaign originated in the south east area, illustrated right, and has focussed on improving the broadband provision in an area that was, arguably, left behind when the Superfast Broadband programme was delivered. Properties to the east of Jacklyns Lane and to the west of the area outlined in red, were upgraded to full fibre in 2017. However, no such improvement was made to the south east quadrant.



A Gigabit Voucher funded upgrade has been proposed for this area and has recently been submitted by Openreach to the DCMS for approval. The scheme covers 373 properties including two mobile phone masts on White Hill Lane in the east of the area. BT have given a final quote of £387,230 for the work (£1038.15 per premise). 197 of the affected properties have “pledged their voucher” in support (53.1% excluding the phone masts). This includes 22 properties that qualify as SMEs. The upgrade cost is expected to be fully covered by the Gigabit vouchers and the Hampshire County Council top-up grant.

The main feature of the work is the installation of a 1.5km long fibre optic trunk from Cabinet 4, along Sun Lane and Tichborne Down, with three “T-offs” en route (Sun Hill Crescent, Appledown Close, and Orchard Close). This work is mitigated by the expectation that the existing BT ducts along the entire route may be re-used.

When Project Gigabit was announced in March 2021, there was doubt as to whether the scheme could proceed using voucher funding. However, a letter (6th May 2021) from Matt Warman, the Undersecretary of State for Digital Infrastructure, sent to our local MP (Steve Brine) gave confidence that this option was still available. This understanding was subsequently confirmed by the Project Gigabit Summer Update.

Voucher Funding versus Project Gigabit

The South East Alresford Scheme provides a useful test case for voucher funding versus the Project Gigabit procurement. The following justifications for voucher funding have been identified:

1. The scheme is structurally different to the remainder of the town.

In the rest of Alresford, most properties are within 150 metres of their nearest BT Cabinet. The rollout of Full Fibre is predominantly the connection of individual properties using Fibre Optic cables and is similar to any other urban area in the country.

On the other hand, the rollout cost for the South East quadrant has the additional overhead of the 1.5km Fibre Optic trunk, and that is before the connection of individual properties can take place. This distorts the cost of Full Fibre Rollout with a significant outlay before any individual property can be connected.

There is a concern and expectation that any supplier bidding for LOT 27 in New Alresford will always want to separate out the South East Quadrant from the remainder of the town in order to show that difference in cost and may even want to “cherry pick” the area by excluding the South East Quadrant in order to show a lower price per property.

Using voucher funding recognises that structural difference and allows a more uniform approach to the Full Fibre procurement for the remainder of the town.

2. This is already a “left behind” area.

The Superfast Broadband programme was mostly limited to upgrading the cabinets to FTTC. This automatically “left behind” any areas that were a significant distance from their nearest cabinet and with broadband speeds below that which is mostly regarded as the minimum acceptable. These areas should be prioritised over those with “acceptable” speeds.

The South East Quadrant is such an area and includes many properties below the 10Mb/s minimum universal broadband service level [6]. However, due to the above structural issues, any individual property would have an upgrade cost greater than the £3,400 level set by Ofcom for a no cost, to the consumer, upgrade. Only by working together in partnership can the properties in this area get a broadband service better than the minimum universal service level.

3. The User Demand has been Demonstrated

Over 53% of the residents in the area have pledged their voucher, demonstrating not just that the demand is there, but the money will be well spent on promoting a digital infrastructure.

The application of the Gigabit Voucher scheme to this area should be public money well spent, given the clearly demonstrated demand. It is also a priority area, more deserving of early upgrade to full fibre than areas which already have several times the broadband speed. Rolling out Project Gigabit to the remainder of the town will also be simplified as the biggest problem facing potential suppliers will have been removed from the scope of the tender.

BDUK may wish to consider the above as representative not just of the South East Alresford area, but of many areas in market towns. In particular, there is usually a reason why a specific area has

been “left behind” and distance from the nearest cabinet is a major reason. These areas should be considered separately and prioritised both in order to simplify the Project Gigabit procurement process and to avoid the risk of supplier “cherry picking”, resulting in such areas becoming even further left behind.

Survey Data

In the course of preparing the South East Alresford Voucher Request submission, useful data was gathered by the team both in respect of the website voucher submission requests and the door-to-door canvassing. In the case of the website submissions, each resident was required to give explicit permission for the data to be shared with Openreach and the DCMS/BDUK. The website sourced information is necessarily restricted to those supporting the scheme. The door-to-door survey was able to determine some of the reasons why some residents were not interested in joining the scheme.

Website Sourced Data

The following table breaks down the voucher submission requests by postcode:

Area	Postcode(s)	Vouchers Pledged	Total Properties	Pledge Rate
The Castles	SO24 9LP, SO24 9PG, SO24 9PH, SO24 9PJ, SO24 9PL, SO24 9PQ	42	53	79.2%
Orchard Close	SO24 9PY	48	71	67.6%
The Lakes	SO24 9NH, SO24 9NJ, SO24 9NL, SO24 9NN, SO24 9NP, SO24 9NQ, SO24 9NR	54	95	56.8%
Tichborne Down	SO24 9PA, SO24 9NE, SO24 9PA, SO24 9PB	19	35	54.3%
Appledown Close	SO24 9ND	30	79	38.0%
Bell House /Headley Close	SO24 9XE, SO24 9XF	4	38	10.5%
		197	371	53.1%
Companies		17		
Sole Trader		5		

Note: the two mobile phone masts were excluded from the list of properties able to pledge a Gigabit Voucher.

In the above, there appears to be a strong correlation between the voucher pledge rate and two factors:

1. Owner-occupier versus renter, and
2. Current broadband speed.

The “Castles” is at the western end of the area and comprises a group of larger single and two storey predominately owner-occupied properties. They also have < 9Mb/s broadband speed. The almost 80% pledge rate here was not surprising.

The “Lakes” is similarly a predominately owner-occupier area, but has better broadband speeds, understood to be between ~16Mb/s to almost 30Mbps/s. The lower pledge rate is believed to be a reflection of the relatively higher broadband speed. Orchard Close is in between the two.

At the other extreme is “Bell House”. This is a group of apartments converted from the former Town Workhouse. These are believed to be largely rentals. Broadband speeds here are believed to be better than 26Mb/s.

Appledown Close is a mixed area of owner-occupiers and rentals, and a higher proportion of older residents than the other areas. It has a similar broadband speed to Orchard Close and the Lakes. The renter factor is again believed to be the dominant factor in the lower take up rate.

An important objective of the door-to-door survey was to understand these differences (see below).

When submitting their voucher pledge, residents were also invited to add a comment. By their nature, these were typically positive reasons, e.g. (a selection of unedited responses is given below)

- “I work from home half of the time so having faster broadband would be great.”
- “The increased speed would be really beneficial as my wife works at home “
- “Urgently needed as at certain times of the day in particular the current facility seems unable to cope. We use it for Zoom which often comes up with 'low bandwidth' many thanks.”
- “this would massively improve our day to day life”
- “Better broadband speeds are essential for me now that i will be working from home more often.”

The reasons given were predominantly work related. There are a considerable number of residents who are now working from home and are expected to continue to do so on a permanent basis.

Informal feedback also referenced pressure from the younger members of the community who see access to high speed broadband as a right rather than a privilege.

Service reliability was also mentioned regularly. FTTC is seen locally as unreliable with many service breaks and a degrading service over time with a gradual drop off in the broadband speed.

Interestingly, one voucher pledge was received from a resident that does not currently have the internet. The reason given was pressure from grand-children and a perception that they were more likely to visit if there was good Wifi.

Door to Door Canvassing Data

The door-to-door canvass took place in the late May, early June timeframe and was aimed at maximising the voucher pledges. Information about the proposed scheme was distributed and a network of "Street Co-ordinators" was established to help answer questions arising from the canvass. The canvass was conducted by residents and the local councillors. The literature given out also showed the support of the Town Council.

The canvass identified eight empty properties and solicited only fifteen explicit negative responses. The remainder either:

- Were non-committal,
- did not answer the door or
- could not be contacted. Bell House was a specific problem in that it was not possible to gain entry.

Specific reasons and issues both arising from the canvass and reported by the Street Co-ordinators were:

1. Current Broadband speed is satisfactory for our use.
2. Concern about any increase in cost.
3. Renting the property - do not expect to be here long enough to benefit.
4. Expect to move house in the near future.
5. There was also concern expressed about changing broadband supplier if their current supplier did not support Full Fibre. This went with a strong reluctance to break any existing contract before it concluded. Plusnet was often mentioned a potential problem here in that they market a very competitively priced product but, as yet, have no Full Fibre Product available in the Alresford area.
6. Concern was also expressed about a potential loss of the landline service. This was largely from older residents and who were also not aware of the expected discontinuation of the PSTN in 2025. These residents are likely to need assistance in migrating to VoIP services whether this is the result of an upgrade to Full Fibre or PSTN discontinuation.
7. A specific case was identified where the resident's continued independence was dependent on reliable communications. That is, it was understood that their relatives were only content to let them live alone as long as they were sure that, in an emergency, help could be summoned. This made any proposed change a matter for concern.
8. Some residents were concerned about the works that would be needed to install the fibre. This was not simply worries about digging up the garden, but was due to elaborate paving having been installed.
9. Some residents also referred to the need to use the internet for watching live TV - and hence the importance of reliable and performant broadband. Alresford is in a fringe area for Freeview reception and the signal is often disrupted in anti-cyclonic conditions.

Other Responses

During the South East Alresford campaign, we also received “out of area” requests to extend the scope of the scheme. These had to be politely declined as the emphasis was on sharing a common infrastructure. However, this did demonstrate the extent of the interest in Full Fibre Communications beyond the “left behind” areas.

One particularly interesting request for their street to join the South East Alresford scheme, was received from a resident in SO24 9PP who was surprised to be told that Full Fibre Broadband was already available in their area. It seems that they were a customer of Sky Broadband, who had not notified them of the availability of Full Fibre. This may be because Sky Broadband were not offering a Full Fibre service and had no incentive to tell the resident that they could get a better service from another ISP.

Conclusions

There is very strong demand for full fibre communication not just in the South East Quadrant of Alresford, but in the wider area. It is required for both work and leisure. It is essential to support the move to “Work From Home”, either part time or full time, and it is believed that the economy will suffer if the rollout is delayed. Government funding and Project Gigabit is to be very much welcomed and should be seen as a spending priority.

If the DCMS is to maximise the rollout speed and gain the widest benefits from Project Gigabit then as much information as possible should be identified about the network topology in each procurement area. The local experience is that much of Alresford - which should not be that atypical of any English Market Town - is not really that different from any urban area, except that there are specific issues that need to be identified and focused on.

The main issue in Alresford results from the lack of new BT Cabinets being deployed after 1970 and the consequential long copper lines to properties built after that date. What was then expedient has now become a reason for an area being left behind. South East Alresford requires a new 1.5 km Fibre Optic trunk to be installed and this is probably true of many market towns that have grown over the last fifty years.

Understanding where this and similar issues exist may well be critical to ensuring a smooth rollout and the appropriate focus of public funds.

Funding Alternatives

The two funding streams of Project Gigabit procurement and Gigabit Vouchers appears to be well founded. Gigabit Vouchers will always be highly valuable for funding innovative deployments in hard to reach areas. However, as in the case of South East Alresford, they are also of great value when it comes to expediting Full Fibre Deployment in “left behind” areas where there is high demand.

On the other hand, vouchers cannot do everything. We found that “renters” do not (and this should be obvious) have the same commitment to a property that owner-occupiers do. Gigabit voucher funded projects are unlikely to be successful without a high proportion of owner-occupiers.

However, areas with a high number of renters should not be disadvantaged and Project Gigabit procurements will be essential for these areas.

It is also difficult to generate the same level of demand for full fibre upgrade in areas which are near FTTC cabinets. Properties in such areas do get an adequate service for today's applications. However, this is unlikely to remain true as new applications are rolled out. If there are too many that are not upgraded because they are perceived to have an adequate service for today, then new applications will themselves see stunted growth. Project Gigabit Procurements are right for these areas as well in order to avoid such a problem.

Marketing Full Fibre Availability

The DCMS should also be aware of how ISPs can both promote Full Fibre Broadband, as well as delay its introduction.

Marketing the availability of Full Fibre once it has been installed is important, given local feedback. ISPs that do not offer a Full Fibre Service have no motivation to let their customers know that they could upgrade to a better service available from a competitor. If the full value of public subsidy is to be realised then it is important that residents are made aware of the upgrade as soon as it takes place.

Where voucher funding is used then the Community Fibre Partnership is very likely to do this work. However, there is no such local initiative where Project Gigabit procurements are used to drive the upgrade. The DCMS should consider whether the supplier responsible for installing the Fibre should also be responsible for an initial, ISP neutral, marketing campaign in order to maximise the take up of Full Fibre Broadband.

ISPs that are slow to offer Full Fibre services are also a problem, especially if they lock the customers into long and difficult to exit contracts. The DCMS may wish to consider a regulation along the lines of a right to break a broadband contract, without penalty, when the ISP does not offer an upgrade to Full Fibre once Full Fibre has been installed. If nothing else, this would concentrate the minds of affected ISPs.

Loss of the Landline Service

This is an issue that is wider than Project Gigabit and Full Fibre rollout. However, it has been identified by our survey work and needs to be highlighted.

Amongst the residential users of Landline Services, there is currently insufficient knowledge of the proposed termination of the PSTN in 2025, and how to migrate to replacement services. Those affected are often the most vulnerable in the community and will need help. A "helpline" is unlikely to be sufficient and a more "hands on" approach will be necessary.

The industry that benefits from the termination of the PSTN should be required to fund the support services necessary to enable these users to migrate to replacement services.

References

1. PROJECT GIGABIT - Hampshire and Isle Of Wight - REQUEST FOR INFORMATION, Dates: 19th August 2021 - 20th September 2021.
2. BT Cabinets in Hampshire - <https://www.hampshiresuperfastbroadband.com/about-the-project/live-cabinets/>
3. Project Gigabit Phase One Delivery Plan - 19/3/2021
4. Project Gigabit Delivery Plan Summer Update - 2/8/2021
5. FTTP 4 Alresford Website: <https://fttp4alresford.uk>
6. OFCOM: Your right to request a decent broadband service: What you need to know - <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers/broadband-uso-need-to-know>.