

# UltraFast Broadband for Little Milton

**A somewhat long but important message!**

***For those short on time, here are the highlights of an unfortunately long, but important, piece:***

- Our current broadband provision is via FTTC (fibre to the cabinet). While this is currently adequate for most of us, it is old, time-limited technology that one day will no longer be fit for purpose.
- Far superior FTTP (fibre to the premises) is being rolled out UK wide further supported by a government voucher scheme for harder to reach rural areas.
- **There is already a company, Airband, aiming to bring FTTP to businesses in the area**, but it is unclear how many residential properties in Little Milton they will connect.
- **Once they have completed the initial work (likely Jan 22) some or all properties in Little Milton may no longer be eligible for the government voucher scheme, which could be worth £1,500 per premise.**
- **Airband may also hold a monopoly on ultrafast broadband in our village for some time.**
- **How can we take control of this situation?** If enough of us 'express an interest' in having FTTP to our homes then we can have Openreach quote to carry out installation work for the whole village, which will result in multiple providers competing for our business.
- **We need to contact Openreach quickly to keep our options open.**
- **If you use the internet at home then this could be important to you today** and is certainly vital to the village in the future - please read below for the detail.
- If you are interested in Little Milton being connected to modern broadband, please email your address, postcode and landline number (if available) to [chairman@littlemilton.org.uk](mailto:chairman@littlemilton.org.uk).
- **Simply expressing your interest at this point carries no obligation** – the weight of numbers may improve our chances of the work being costed competitively and taking place. Commitment to an ultrafast broadband package only takes place later in the process - at the final stage of the viability assessment.

***For those interested in some more detail and background, please read the below.***

## **Background**

Little Milton's broadband internet is currently provided via Fibre-to-the-cabinet (FTTC) technology. This means our internet traffic travels down a fibre-optic cable to the green Openreach cabinets visible on the A329, and from there each household is connected by traditional copper phone lines. This technology has probably reached its peak. Although, for most of us in the village, our current internet service is probably more than adequate, there is little doubt that in a few years' time this may well be wholly insufficient or even obsolete.

The current technology being rolled out nationally to address this is called Fibre-to-the-premise (FTTP). Rather than relying on a copper line completing the last few hundred yards from the cabinet, each household or business is served by a fibre-optic line all the way to their premise. The capacity (or bandwidth) of this arrangement is exponentially bigger than FTTC and advances are still being made in increasing the speed and flow of digital traffic through fibre-optic cables.

Installing this network of fibre-optic cable is quite a job. For rural areas like ourselves it is often not commercially feasible for providers like Openreach.

Hence why the government launched "Project Gigabit" – a scheme designed to help fund FTTP rollouts to rural areas. It is based on assigning a voucher to each qualifying residence worth £1,500 (or business, worth £3,500). Little Milton currently qualifies for this voucher scheme. In short, and somewhat simplified, it works as follows:

- A group of people expresses their interest in the voucher scheme – there is no obligation at this stage.
- This list of interested parties gets submitted to a provider, for example Openreach, to create a quotation for the cost of installing the FTTP network. At this point it is possible to determine whether the project could potentially be funded wholly or partially by the Project Gigabit voucher scheme.
- Should the project be deemed potentially viable, further steps are taken which include residents and businesses having to "pledge" their voucher to the scheme and commit to taking up a FTTP internet contract soon after the project completes. It is only at this stage that residents need to commit to taking up a fibre package instead of their current internet package.

***So far so good...***

## **Airband**

Many residents will remember that Airband, a relatively small broadband internet company, engaged with our community in 2020 and 2021 via the Parish Council. Airband was awarded a DEFRA funded grant to install FTTP to rural business in our part of Oxfordshire – a completely separate scheme to the above-mentioned Project Gigabit. The spine of their network for this DEFRA scheme is planned to run through some of Little Milton.

At the time Airband was keen to also pick up residential business from the areas where they were installing the DEFRA funded network. Many of you will remember that Airband engaged with the Parish Council during 2020 and early 2021 and gathered expressions of interests from residents (which some of us signed up for). Airband's intention at the time was to use the above Gigabit Voucher scheme to fund the additional roll-out to residential properties in Little Milton. Given that Airband was prepared to do the heavily lifting of running a Gigabit Voucher scheme in Little Milton to connect as many parts of the village as possible, we did not at the time initiate our own scheme.

Some of us have had very bad experiences following up with Airband after this initial expression of interest, ranging from conflicting dates of when installation will occur to being told “the project has been cancelled”. **I have only very recently learned from Airband, after repeated attempts to get some further information, that they did indeed abandon the original idea of using the Gigabit Voucher Scheme to fund the roll-out to residential customers in Little Milton. I believe this is the source of the “the project has been cancelled” message some may have received. Airband has committed to releasing an explanatory statement about this to the village, but I have not received anything yet.**

However, their original DEFRA funded roll-out is continuing, and their current schedule is to start work around the village between October and December, with it going live towards to end of January 2022. They still intend to engage potential residential customers in the village when the network is ready and tested, however without relying on Project Gigabit Vouchers.

### **Where does that leave us as a village?**

- Airband's network will be installed over the coming months, however there is no guarantee it will be available for all residents in the village since it is simply being placed down most of the High Street to facilitate reaching a few business premises that were part of the original DEFRA scheme. It will depend wholly on Airband whether they find it commercially attractive to

connect premises in Little Milton. Although they have stated to me that it is their intention to provide FTTP services to residences in Little Milton, they have not provided details about what that means for those premises not immediately next to the current path of their main cable.

- If we want to ensure a network that reaches most if not all the premises in the village, we need to start from scratch with our own scheme to be installed by another provider, in our case Openreach.

- Should Openreach build a network through the village, residents will initially have a choice of which Internet Service Provider (ISP), e.g. BT Internet, Zen etc, they sign up with. Although Airband will eventually have to open their network to other ISPs, anyone wishing to use Airband's network will initially have to sign up with them.

### **Why is this urgent?**

The Gigabit Vouchers are only valid for premises that do not have access to superfast (>100Gb/sec) internet. As of today, all premises in Little Milton qualify. However, when the Airband project through Little Milton is finally completed, it may well be that several of our premises are deemed to have access to superfast internet, and hence less properties will qualify for Gigabit Vouchers. This in turn will reduce the likelihood of a voucher funded scheme being viable (since there will be less valid vouchers to claim).

**It is therefore the Parish Council's opinion that we need to launch our own scheme as a matter of urgency.** If you are interested in potentially taking up an FTTP package, please add your name to our “Interested parties” list. At this stage there is no commitment. The more premises we add to the list from as many parts of the village as possible, the higher the likelihood that the initial viability study will be positive. At a later stage residents will be asked to “pledge” their voucher to the scheme and commit to taking out a fibre package upon completion. Upon this final “pledged” tally it is then determined if the project goes ahead with full voucher funding, or whether it is conditional on the community coming up with additional funds to make it happen.

If you are interested, please email your address, post-code and landline number(if available) to [chairman@littlemilton.org.uk](mailto:chairman@littlemilton.org.uk). Also, please email me any questions you may have, and I will do my best to answer them.

***Francois van der Merwe***  
***Chairman: Little Milton Parish Council***