

Agenda Item No: 8
Report To: Cabinet
Date: 30 July 2020
Report Title: Update on the Broadband improvements in the Ashford Borough
Report Author: Thomas Jenkins, Economic Development Officer
Portfolio Holder: Cllr Neil Bell, Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT



Summary:

This report analyses the latest data on fixed and mobile telecommunications access within the borough. This shows 99% mobile coverage by at least one of the Mobile Network Operators (MNOs), 90% coverage of premises with superfast broadband connections (>30Mbps), and 6% coverage of Fibre to the Premises (FTTP). Due to the predominantly rural geography of the borough this highlights the continuing requirements for improvements in telecommunications access to ensure residents and businesses have the right access and speeds in this increasingly changing market place.

This report updates members on the activities undertaken to attract investment and improve infrastructure within the borough by private sector operators. In particular the implementation of EMP6 within the Ashford Local Plan.

The report also sets out the potential areas to prioritise moving forward and the importance of broadband and telecommunications infrastructure within the Council's Recovery Plan.

Key Decision: NO
Affected Wards: All Wards
Recommendations: **Cabinet are asked to:-**

- I. Note the content of this report and the Broadband work undertaken in recent years.**
- II. To note that the delivery of broadband is a key priority in the council's Recovery Plan.**

Policy Overview: The Council's existing Five Year Corporate Plan 2015-2020, aimed to "Continue to secure high speed broadband improvements with operators, especially to tackle areas with slow speeds." This was set out in Priority 1, Enterprising Ashford: Economic Investment and Growth.

The Ashford Local Plan (Adopted in February 2019) also identifies the importance of great telecommunications

infrastructure through the adoption of Policy EMP 6 – Promotion of Fibre to the Premises (FTTP).

The Draft Ashford Borough Council Recovery Plan July 2020 is being reported to this Cabinet meeting for approval. Under the key theme of Place Making, Regeneration and Infrastructure, a key action is identified to “Improve broadband coverage and reliability”.

Each of these strategic documents prioritise the requirement for improvements to the existing telecommunications infrastructure.

Financial Implications:

If the recommendations are approved, officers will review the current resources available to identify options for enhanced resources to stimulate greater private sector and government supported investment into broadband and mobile infrastructure within the borough.

Legal Implications:

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N/A
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Risk Assessment

Please see Section 27 within the report.

Equalities Impact Assessment

A fundamental priority in improving affordable broadband and mobile access for residents and businesses within the borough, is to reduce social exclusion and rural isolation. The aspiration to level up access across the borough will look to reduce the current inequalities in access.

Exemption Clauses:

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Report Title: Update on the Broadband improvements in the Ashford Borough.

Purpose of the Report

1. To report to Cabinet on the latest activity undertaken by officers regarding broadband improvements in the borough, provide an update on Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) and Superfast broadband coverage and outline plans for ongoing work.

Issue to be Decided

2. Cabinet to take note of the update on the latest position and note the priority and requirements for improved broadband as set out in the Ashford Borough Council Recovery Plan.

Background

3. The UK government is increasingly supportive of faster digital connectivity, and is providing both financial and regulatory support to help meet its ambition of full gigabit coverage of residential premises by 2025. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has committed £5bn to support a series of programmes including: “outside in” deployment of FTTP in areas unlikely to be commercially viable; FTTP via schemes such as the Local Full Fibre Networks (LFFN); Rural Gigabit Connectivity programmes for the final 20%; and a Gigabit voucher scheme. Furthermore in the 2020 March Budget, the Chancellor reiterated the Government’s plans to invest £5bn to ensure gigabit-capable broadband is able to reach every UK home by the end of 2025.
4. Ashford Borough Council has been pro-actively supporting the rollout of superfast broadband across the borough for many years and is recognised by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as one of the best case studies of Local Authorities taking the lead on broadband improvement. The major development in this sector has been ABC’s inclusion of Policy EMP6 (Promotion of Fibre to the Premises) in its Local Plan from February 2019, which requires nearly all new developments in the borough to provide fibre broadband connections to the premises.
5. The Economic Development team is also actively involved in conversations with individual providers to lobby for improved commercial coverage of the borough, and works closely with KCC’s Broadband team on promoting the Government’s Voucher schemes and Community Fibre Partnerships.

Ashford borough broadband status

6. The Ofcom Connected Nations Report explains in detail the digital connectivity under different technologies, different speeds and different areas. We have

attached to this report as Appendix 1 the results from the latest report (2020 Interim). The following key measures can be identified for Ashford Borough:

- Number of premises with Superfast broadband (>30Mbps): 52,354 (90%)
Superfast broadband UK average: 95%
Ashford change since Summer 2019: +1,899 (no % change),
- Number of premises with Full Fibre (FTTP): 3,477 (6%)
Full Fibre UK average: 12%
Ashford change since Summer 2019: +1,159 (+2% change),
- Number of premises below USO level (<10Mbps): 2,333 (4%)
USO premises UK average: 2%
Ashford change since Summer 2019: +33 (no % change),
- Percentage premises covered with 4G indoors by at least one MNO: 99%
Average across all LAs in UK: 98.9%
Ashford change since Summer 2019: +0.16%
- Percentage premises covered with 4G indoors by all 4 MNOs: 72.9%
Average across all LAs in UK: 76.9%
Ashford change since Summer 2019: +2.3%

7. The figures above need context alongside the comparative UK figures to explain what they mean for Ashford as a predominantly rural borough and why they are like this. The Superfast broadband percentage of properties covered matches approximately population densities due to the required Return On Investment (ROI) by providers in reaching clusters of premises. The more rural an area, the lower the population density and the less percentage of premises are likely to be covered. This is evidenced by the fact that across the country, Tewkesbury (which has the same population density as Ashford – 223 people per km²) also has 90% coverage and Sedgemoor (slightly higher population density - 218) has 91% coverage. In Kent, Folkestone and Hythe has a higher density (316) with 93% coverage and Thanet (much higher density – 1,372) has 97%. Reaching rural areas will always be an issue for commercial infrastructure builds which is why it is important for the council to lead, coordinate and lobby for investment.
8. We would note that the introduction of Local Plan Policy EMP6 is contributing to the increased superfast and FTTP figures with 6% of premises now covered within the Borough, the 6th highest percentage in districts within Kent. Significant % increases will not however be achieved until existing premises are connected to FTTP such as through the investment planned for Tenterden. The changes brought in by Ofcom under USO mean that properties with lower download speeds than 10Mbps are legally entitled to request an improved connection. This is a higher speed level than was previously considered 'decent' under government guidelines and therefore has brought under its scope more properties. Finally we would add that when comparing Ashford borough to other districts in Kent or more widely, the lower

density and higher proportion of rural areas in hard to reach locations is likely to always affect any rankings.

9. The mobile percentage figures have been included to show 4G coverage at 99% of premises within the Borough by at least one of the Mobile Network Operators (MNOs). These figures however highlight the fact that there are still areas within the borough that need a joined up approach to ensure greater coverage by all the main networks, which is why officers are in conversation with Mobile UK about the Shared Rural Network (SRN).

Gigabit Voucher schemes and Community Fibre Partnerships update

10. The Economic Development team has been working closely with KCC to ensure that the Government's vouchers schemes have been publicised and that communities across the borough are able to improve their connections. The Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS) and Rural Gigabit Connectivity scheme (RGC) together with a Kent Top Up Voucher, have allowed residents and businesses to install gigabit capable connections at their premises. The GBVS offered up to £2,500 to help businesses and homes gain access to a 1Gbps capable broadband and the RGC offers up to £3,500 for small businesses and up to £1,500 for residents. The Kent Top Up voucher allows households in Kent to claim a further £1,000 on top of the RGC voucher. The GBVS was closed in May 2020 but the Rural and Kent vouchers are still available.
11. A map has recently been published on ispreview.co.uk which shows data from DCMS relating to vouchers issued and premises connected across the UK. Within Ashford borough some areas accessed vouchers from both the GBVS and the RGC. Henwood, Beaver Green, Hinxhill, Smarden, Shadoxhurst and Tenterden accessed these schemes with 44 GBVS vouchers issued, 9 GBVS premises connected, 40 RGC vouchers issued and 0 RGC premises connected. We should point out that the issued vouchers have a validity of 12 months, so connections from vouchers that have been issued but not yet connected, and their associated payments when the connection is live, will continue for a further 12 months. As a result final numbers for the scheme will not be available until after Spring 2021.
12. Alongside the voucher schemes, the Economic Development team has been working more closely with KCC on Community Fibre Partnerships (CfP). These are the main mechanism employed by Openreach to increase demand-led community-led broadband installation in hard to reach locations. The project requires a community to come together and work with Openreach on installing FTTP to their premises. The community has to agree however to use BT as its sole supplier as a result of the improved connections, which appears to be a key issue with take-up of the programme so far. The reporting of Community Fibre Partnerships (CfP) creations and deliveries is subject to a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) between KCC and Openreach. We can however report to Members that Godmersham, Hastingleigh and Mersham are projects being set up or progressed under the CfP programme.

Council-focussed work update

13. Members will be familiar with the fact that Ashford Borough Council has implemented the first Local Plan policy in the country which requires developers to install Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) on most new developments in the borough. Whilst there are exceptions, this policy is proving effective in ensuring that residential and commercial properties in the borough are future-proofed. The Policy has required a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) to be written which acts as key guidance for developers and providers in delivering FTTP across new developments. This document helps clarify the policy by giving context and offering examples of information required at various stages during the Planning process. The Economic Development team, together with colleagues in Planning Policy have been progressing the SPD which will be brought to Cabinet in July 2020 for final approval.
14. Ashford Borough Council's Housing Operations team has also been progressing work to install FTTP or gigabit-capable connections to residential premises in our ownership. This project was set up in 2019 with the view to future-proofing the council's residential portfolio. Continuing discussions are being undertaken by the Economic Development team to seek a partner who can progress this project to deliver fast and reliable broadband to our tenants.
15. The Economic Development team has also recently signed Ashford Borough Council as a member of INCA (Independent Network Cooperative Association). The members of INCA are supporting, planning, building and operating sustainable, independent and interconnected networks that advance the economic and social development of the communities they serve and permit the provision of applications and services through open competition, innovation and diversity. They are working together to create cohesive interconnected next generation networks. This membership will allow Ashford to interact more directly with providers and gain valuable insight into market and government updates.

Provider updates

16. Whilst updates on specific projects and build plans are commercially sensitive, there are some updates that are in the public domain which Members should be aware of.
17. Openreach announced the extension of their Fibre First programme to include villages in rural locations. Fibre First is Openreach's programme to connect four million homes and business in the UK to a gigabit-capable connection by March 2021. Most of this infrastructure is still being delivered at the "lower end" of their £300 – £400 per premises passed cost range however they have included premises in higher ranges as part of this expansion. Tenterden and St Michaels exchange has been included on their Fibre First programme which means that a retro-fit of FTTP is planned for the majority of premises served by the Tenterden exchange. Full details of this part of the programme are commercially sensitive and have not been shared with any local authority at present.

18. Virgin Media have gained permission from KCC to undertake works at Willesborough, however this has been scheduled for much later in 2020. This is likely to be further delayed now due to the coronavirus crisis. Virgin Media have been running a similar programme called the Lightning Project which would connect 4 million premises in the UK to gigabit capable infrastructure by the end of 2020. According to the figures this deadline is unlikely to be met and our understanding is that there are no plans for Ashford to be included in this programme currently.
19. NextGenAccess Ltd is a fibre optic network builder that has signed a 20 year lease with High Speed 1. This should support a track-side rail deployment of new fibre to help bring “essential ultra-fast broadband” within easy reach of Kent local authorities, providers, mobile operators and business communities. The project is privately funded. The Economic Development team have been engaging with NextGenAccess to ensure the borough is served with points of presence including Ashford town centre, Newtown Works, MOJO and Waterbrook.

Digital connectivity work going forward

20. Broadband has been a growing priority for many, with technology evolving constantly and social trends changing at an increased pace. Residents and businesses in the borough’s communities rely on this technology and we need to ensure the future-proofing of infrastructure to enable better digital connectivity. The Coronavirus pandemic has further highlighted this need, with vulnerable residents in isolation and many people working from home. Digital connectivity has been identified as a top priority for the council in the emerging Recovery Plan being considered by Cabinet in July.
21. Whilst broadband, in particular FTTP, has been the sole focus of this work to date, there are other aspects of digital connectivity which will require action in order to deliver a fully improved digital borough.
22. Mobile coverage in parts of the borough is known to be an issue, with approximately 1% of premises not being able to access 4G indoors and some premises having issues with 2G and 3G. The Economic Development Team have not undertaken work with Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) to date however have reached out to Mobile UK, the trade association for MNOs in the UK. Mobile UK is coordinating the Shared Rural Network (SRN) which will see the main MNOs improve their mobile capability to reach more premises in hard-to-reach areas.
23. Furthermore the increase in the Internet of Things (IoT) is leading many council’s to investigate Smart Cities where some problems and tasks can be in part addressed by using smart equipment (such as intelligent traffic systems, smart bins or remote lighting). This particular aspect of digital connectivity could have a beneficial impact financially as well as physically for Ashford and the wider borough. This also links with a long-standing ambition to provide public WiFi in Ashford town centre which can have a multitude of benefits for visitors and businesses.
24. Whilst controversial, the increase in market rollout of 5G is something that will need to be considered as well. Maidstone have recently been announced as

having had investment in 5G technology and Ashford were announced as being part of a scheme from O2. O2 announced at the beginning of June that Ashford was one of 60 locations across the UK where they will be rolling out 5G networks.

25. To date the Economic Development team, together with colleagues across the council, have managed to attract investment from providers, create a policy which will future proof developments and continued to promote ways for broadband improvements to take place. The work is undertaken across a number of teams but coordinated by the Economic Development Officer, with support from the Economic Development Manager. The Economic Development Officer (EDO) dedicates approximately a third of their time to this activity, and the work undertaken over the past year has included:
 - i. Working with Planning Policy on the development of the Policy EMP6 SPD as well as working with Planning on implementing the policy as conditions for applications
 - ii. Light touch engagement with providers currently building in the borough or with plans for future builds
 - iii. Regular updates with KCC colleagues on work such as the Voucher schemes and Community Fibre Partnerships as well as any Government updates
 - iv. Attendance at relevant events or meetings (primarily Connected Britain and DCMS/BDUK updates) when possible.

26. As part of the increased priority for Broadband within the emerging Coronavirus Recovery plan, further activity could be considered with the prioritisation of resources in this area. If the council decides that further work in this area is essential, the other elements that could be taken forward include:
 - i. Be more proactive in lobbying and attracting commercial investment from providers
 - ii. Take a leading role in coordinating programmes such as the Voucher schemes and Community Fibre Partnerships
 - iii. Provide increased presence at broadband and digital related events or meetings, raising the profile of Ashford for investors.
 - iv. Be at the forefront of emerging funding, programmes and trials being rolled out by Government or providers
 - v. Proactively engage with Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) and Mobile UK to progress the Shared Rural Network (SRN) and improve mobile connectivity in the borough
 - vi. Develop a strategy for digital connectivity to include investigating new and future technology within the realms of the Internet of Things (IoT), Smart Cities and 5G

Risk Assessment

27. The main key risks currently identified are:
 - a. Lower levels of access to broadband and mobile networks will impact on the economic aspirations for the borough to target more knowledge based businesses and employees.
 - b. Lower levels of access will impact students within the area with increasing use of online education and training.

- c. Lower access impacts resident's levels of social inclusion and isolation from services, and have the potential to increase inequality.
- d. The Council's, residents and businesses digital transformation plans will be impacted by the levels of broadband and mobile access throughout the borough.

Options Considered

28. In considering the options for Ashford Borough Council to act, the principle objective has been to maximise the opportunities for residents and businesses within the Borough to access affordable ultrafast broadband and mobile telecommunications.
29. The chosen option has been to dedicate officer time, where possible, to attract investment, work with partner organisations and support improved broadband rollout across the borough. The scope and prioritisation of this work stream is widening and should include mobile coverage and future technologies as well. Improved broadband and telecommunications has therefore been prioritised within the Council's Recovery Plan.

Next Steps in the Process

30. If the Recovery Plan is approved at this Cabinet meeting, officers will undertake a review of the available resources to support greater activity and expertise within this area. Resources will be prioritised to extend the good work already achieved over recent years and attract increasing commercial investment during the next few years.

Conclusions

31. Ashford Borough Council is one of the few local authorities to have dedicated officer time to improving broadband within Kent. Successes such as the implementation of Policy EMP6 (Fibre to the Premises) in Ashford's Local Plan and the trials run by Openreach at Godinton Park (one of two pilot projects nationally investigating new technology for infrastructure delivery) have placed Ashford as a leading authority on broadband improvements. However, it is clear that more can be done and should be done to improve digital connectivity for residents and businesses in the borough. Improved connections and technologies are likely to be rolled out as they become the norm in towns and cities across the UK. This would likely happen in most areas of the Borough over a number of years without much stimulus or proactive engagement from the Council. However if Ashford wants to ensure it is future proofed, that ultrafast broadband covers as many difficult to reach rural properties as possible, and is at the forefront of digital connectivity, it will need to prioritise Digital Connectivity through the delivery of the Recovery Plan.

Portfolio Holder's Views

32. "This should be one of the main priorities for the Council and is crucial to our Recovery Plan moving forward.

This excellent report highlights where the borough currently is regarding broadband and what we are currently doing.

However, I would draw colleagues' attention to paragraphs 26 & 27 in particular. These describe what more we could do and the risks of inadequate broadband."

33. Cllr Neil Bell, Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT

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Current Coverage and Situation (Connected Nations Report 2020 Interim)

laura_name	All Premises	All Matched Premises	SFBB availability (% premises)	UFBB availability (% premises)	Full Fibre availability (% premises)	% of premises unable to receive 2Mbit/s	% of premises unable to receive 5Mbit/s	% of premises unable to receive 10Mbit/s	% of premises unable to receive 30Mbit/s	% of premises below the USO	% of premises with NGA	% of premises with decent broadband from FWA	% of premises SFBB from FWA
ASHFORD	58131	58054	90.1	44	6	0.4	1.8	3.8	9.8	4	98.4	0	0
CANTERBURY	74670	74474	93.4	2.9	2.9	0.2	0.6	1.2	6.3	1.5	99.2	0	0
DARTFORD	48938	48918	95.6	49	12	0.2	0.6	1.5	4.4	1.9	97.7	0	0
DOVER	55311	55261	92.7	28.6	1.9	0.5	1	2.1	7.2	2.4	98.1	0	0
FOLKESTONE AND HYTHE	54227	54182	93.3	37.9	1.9	0.5	1.2	2.3	6.6	2.5	97.9	0	0
GRAVESHAM	45061	45046	95.9	63.9	6.4	0	0.4	0.8	4.1	0.8	98.5	0	0
MAIDSTONE	76815	76707	91.9	49.9	5.1	0.5	1.6	2.8	7.9	3	97.5	0	0
MEDWAY	121257	121150	97.1	73.4	1.6	0	0.3	0.7	2.8	0.9	98.6	0	0
SEVENOAKS	53115	53079	91.5	28	4	0.3	0.6	1.4	8.4	1.5	99.3	0	0
SWALE	66896	66654	93	31.5	1.8	0.2	0.9	2	6.6	2.5	98.4	0	0
THANET	72763	72568	96.9	43	43	0	0.5	1.3	2.9	1.6	99.3	0	0
TONBRIDGE AND MALLING	56895	56828	94.6	55.3	7.4	0.2	0.5	1.4	5.3	1.6	98.4	0	0
TUNBRIDGE WELLS	52221	52162	91	46.2	7.2	0.1	1.2	2.9	8.9	3.1	98.3	0	0

laura_name	All Premises	All Matched Premises	Number of premises with SFBB availability	Number of premises with UFBB availability	Number of premises with Full Fibre availability	Number of premises unable to receive 2Mbit/s	Number of premises unable to receive 5Mbit/s	Number of premises unable to receive 10Mbit/s	Number of premises unable to receive 30Mbit/s	Number of premises below the USO	Number of premises with NGA	Number of premises able to receive decent broadband from FWA	Number of premises able to receive SFBB from FWA
ASHFORD	58131	58054	52354	25598	3477	214	1029	2185	5700	2333	57204	0	0

Notes for Connected Nations Report 2020 Interim figures

ACRONYMS:

SFBB – Superfast Broadband

UFBB – Ultrafast Broadband

USO – Universal Service Obligation

WISP – Wireless Internet Service Provider

FWA – Fixed Wireless Access

Column Header meanings (the same definition applies to percentage and number figures)

Current headers	Note
laura_name	Local and Unitary Authority Names
All premises	Count of all premises, in scope, based on Ordnance Survey AddressBase® Premium Epoch 73
All matched premises	Count of all premises matched to operator records with a nonzero recorded coverage. Unmatched premises are unclassified
SFBB availability (% premises)	Percentage of premises that have Superfast Broadband (30Mbit/s or greater) coverage from fixed broadband
UFBB availability (% premises)	Percentage of premises that have Ultrafast Broadband (300Mbit/s or greater) coverage from fixed broadband
Full Fibre availability (% premises)	Percentage of premises that have coverage from a full fibre service from fixed broadband
% of premises unable to receive 2Mbit/s	Percentage of premises that do not have access to services above 2Mbit/s from fixed broadband
% of premises unable to receive 5Mbit/s	Percentage of premises that do not have access to services above 5Mbit/s from fixed broadband
% of premises unable to receive 10Mbit/s	Percentage of premises that do not have access to services above 10Mbit/s from fixed broadband
% of premises unable to receive 30Mbit/s	Percentage of premises that do not have access to services above 30Mbit/s from fixed broadband
% of premises below the USO	Percentage of premises that do not have access to download speeds at or above 10Mbit/s and upload speeds at or above 1Mbit/s including non-matched records and zero predicted speeds from fixed broadband, WISPs and EE FWA

% of premises with NGA	Percentage of premises with Next Generation Access from fixed broadband
% of premises able to receive decent broadband from FWA	Percentage of premises with Decent Broadband from WISPs
% of premises able to receive SFBB from FWA	Percentage of premises with Superfast Broadband (30Mbit/s or above) from WISPs

Connected Nations 2020 LSOA data associated to Wards (Graph).

Superfast Broadband

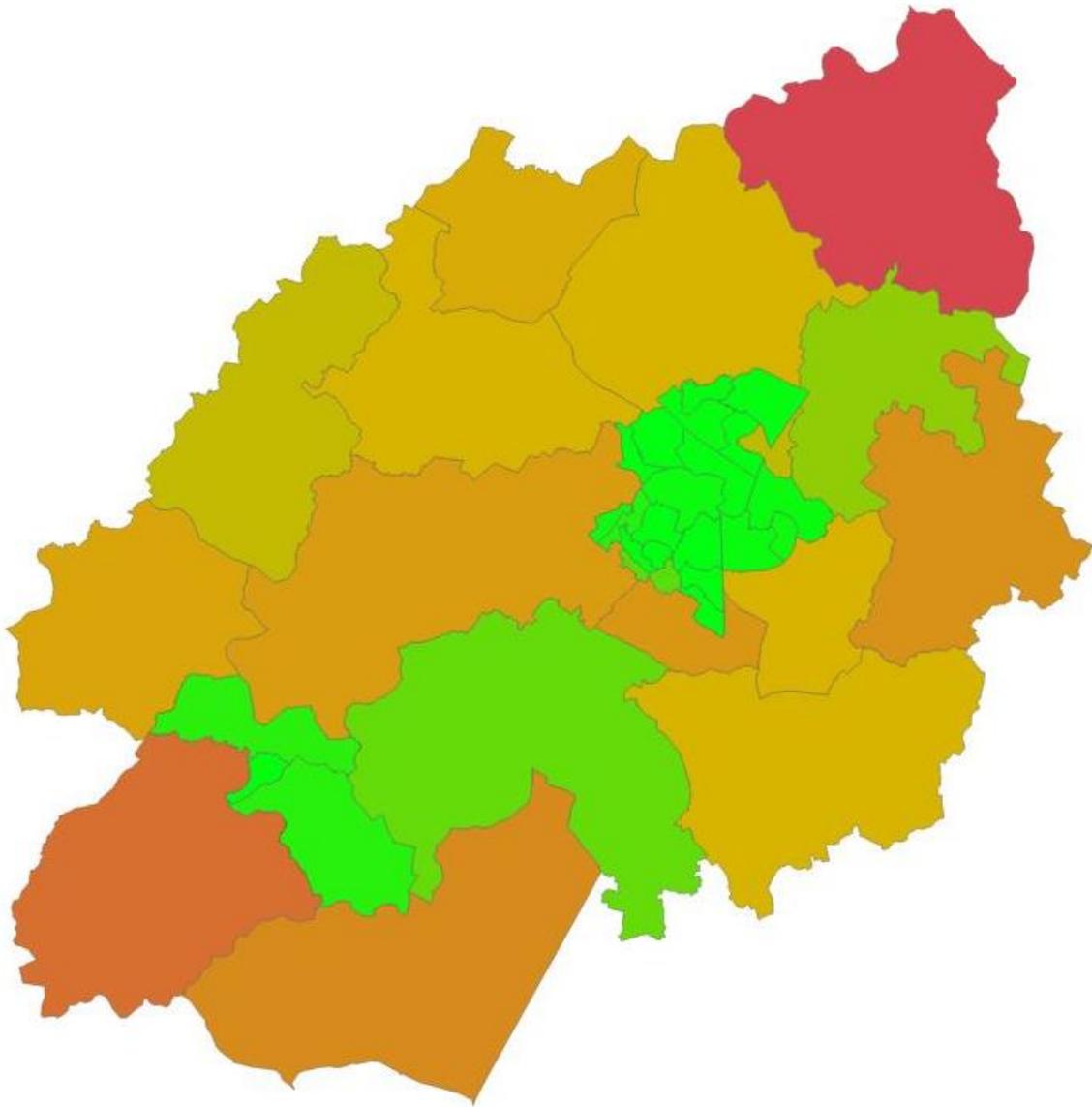


Figure 1. Superfast Broadband (download speeds >30Mbps) - Average % availability by ward. Red (low) to Green (High) sliding scale. Actual figures for each ward are in the table below.

Full Fibre Broadband (FTTP)

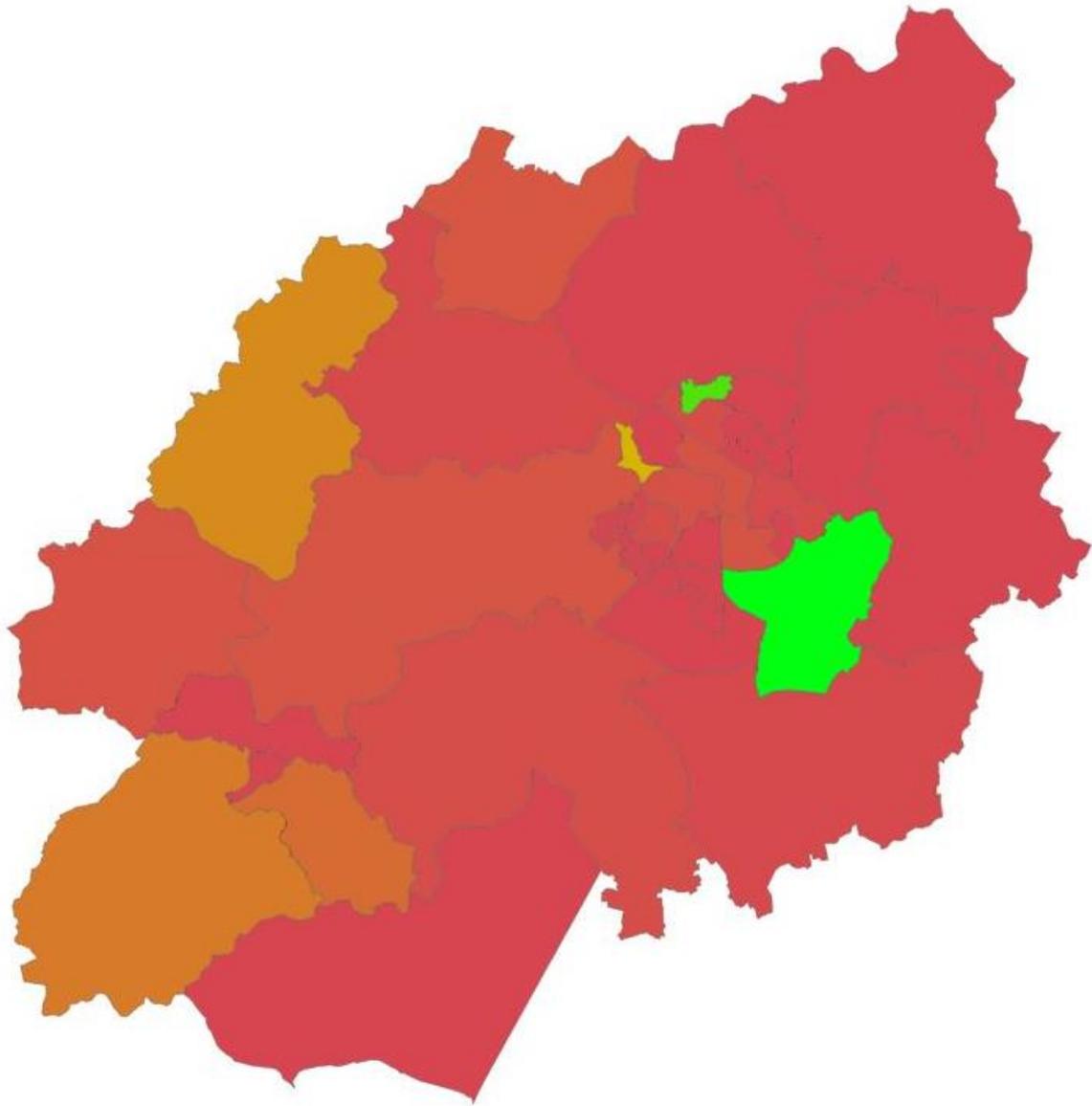


Figure 2. Full Fibre (FTTP) – Average % availability by ward. Red (low) to Green (High) sliding scale. Actual figures for each ward are in the table below.

Connected Nations 2020 LSOA data associated to Wards (Table)

	SFBB availability (% premises)	Full Fibre availability (% premises)
Aylesford & East Stour	98.9	2.4
Beaver	100.0	1.4
Biddenden	74.0	2.2
Bircholt	69.9	0.0
Bockhanger	99.1	1.2
Bybrook	100.0	0.0
Charing	75.3	2.8
Conningbrook & Little Burton Farm	79.8	0.0
Downs North	53.9	0.0
Downs West	77.3	0.0
Furley	99.5	2.4
Goat Lees	99.5	27.5
Godinton	99.9	17.0
Highfield	98.1	0.0
Isle of Oxney	68.5	0.0
Kennington	99.5	0.0
Kingsnorth Village & Bridgefield	71.2	0.0
Mersham, Sevington South with Finberry	77.1	33.9
Norman	99.9	0.0
Park Farm North	100.0	0.0
Park Farm South	100.0	0.0
Repton	100.0	0.0
Rolvenden & Tenterden West	62.7	8.2
Roman	90.3	0.0
Saxon Shore	77.2	0.7
Singleton East	96.3	0.5
Singleton West	98.5	0.0
Stanhope	99.9	0.0
Tenterden North	99.3	0.0
Tenterden South	95.7	5.9
Tenterden St Michael's	95.4	0.0
Upper Weald	77.1	0.8
Victoria	98.7	1.9
Washford	99.9	0.0
Weald Central	72.3	2.4
Weald North	79.1	10.9
Weald South	89.2	1.4
Willesborough	99.0	0.9
Wye with Hinxhill	84.7	0.1