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Voucher relaunch FAQ for local councils

This document is for local councils and captures the answers to key questions about the relaunch of the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS). If you have a question which is not answered in this document please raise it with your Local Delivery Lead.

FAQ

1. What is changing?

- We are increasing standard maximum voucher values for residents and businesses from £1,500 and £3,500 respectively to £4,500 for all beneficiaries.
- We are changing the eligibility criteria we use to assess whether gigabit broadband is already available to access at an address. Instead of using Ofcom broadband coverage data we will use the data captured through our National Rolling Open Market Review (NR OMR) and Public Reviews (PRs) which is used to inform our Project Gigabit procurement planning. We will continue to consider premises in Scotland and Northern Ireland against Ofcom data until the appropriate equivalent data is available in either country.
- We are introducing a new funding platform to process voucher requests, claims for funding and payments.
- We are introducing updated supplier terms and conditions, to reflect the changes to the voucher scheme.

2. What does this mean in practice?

- With a higher voucher value available, we would expect suppliers to be able to build further, and potentially more quickly, to communities in need.
- Values:
 - We will apply the new values to new project submissions only from 5 December 2022 onwards.
 - We will assess new projects using the same value for money criteria to identify the correct government subsidy contribution and supplier contribution.



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- Suppliers may need to make fewer connections with vouchers to secure the funding they need to make a project viable to build. This reduces the take-up risk that suppliers currently face.
- Higher values also encourage suppliers to build out to expensive, hard-to-reach premises.
- Local government top-ups will be available to be used alongside the higher value to target the most expensive premises.
- Eligibility:
 - We are using our own up-to-date, forward-looking broadband coverage data to assess whether gigabit broadband is already available or planned to an address in order to determine whether it should be eligible for a voucher.
 - Addresses will still need to satisfy the rural ONS definition to be eligible for a voucher.
 - We will update the eligibility checker status messages to reflect the change in status where applicable.
- Funding platform:
 - We are introducing a new online platform for suppliers to submit and manage voucher projects, voucher requests and claims for payments.
 - The new system aims to address some of the challenges which we have with the current platform, and we hope it will be easier and quicker for suppliers to use and, as a result, reduce the number of issues suppliers experience.
 - The platform is for suppliers only so there is no real impact for local councils.

3. Why are we telling local councils now?

- These are significant changes to the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, and in recent months we have been engaging with local councils with the information we've been able to share.
- We needed to plan the implementation of the changes and follow appropriate governance processes before we could confirm and announce the details publicly.



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- To maximise attention for vouchers, we chose to align announcing these changes with the publication of our autumn update.

4. When are the changes being implemented?

- The new voucher values and eligibility criteria will be available to all active voucher suppliers, for new projects, by 23 January 2023.
- We will migrate all active voucher suppliers and existing active project information onto the new funding platform in a phased approach from 5 December 2022 to 23 January 2023.
- We will share a new Go List of addresses eligible for vouchers based on the new eligibility criteria with all active suppliers, so that all suppliers can begin to explore voucher project opportunities at the same time, even if they are yet to be migrated to the new platform. Local councils will also be able to access the Go List.
- We are keen to understand what impact this has for your council area and communities, particularly where there is an existing top-up on offer (see further information on top-ups below). If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to your Local Delivery Lead.

5. What order are you migrating suppliers?

- We will be migrating suppliers over to the new system throughout January, and incorporating a mix of very active and less active suppliers in each group to balance the impact on the platform.
- The first suppliers being migrated have been helping to soft test some of the functionality as the platform has been developed.

6. What about vouchers which are due to expire when suppliers are being migrated to the new platform?

- We have advised suppliers they will have the opportunity to request an extension for any vouchers which are due to expire when they are migrated to the new platform, in advance of migration, if the supplier is not expecting to claim the vouchers beforehand.
- If communities contact you with concerns about vouchers due to expire we would encourage you to tell them to contact the supplier for their project for confirmation on whether the vouchers have been extended.



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- Any requests to extend will not automatically be granted. Suppliers will need to provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate why an extension is necessary. The expectation will be for any extension period to reflect a similar validity period to that being lost due to migration. All requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

7. Why are you doing this now when voucher eligibility in much of the UK is paused due to Project Gigabit procurements?

- We understand that not all areas will be able to immediately benefit from the changes to vouchers, however we were keen to optimise the scheme now so that it will be able to provide a better alternative solution where BDUK is unable to serve addresses through a Project Gigabit procurement.
- The new eligibility and voucher values will apply to any new voucher projects in Lot areas which have not yet been paused.
- Once the build plan for a Project Gigabit contract has been agreed, vouchers will again be unpaused for premises outside of the scope of the contract (but any new projects still need to satisfy our new vouchers eligibility criteria).
- If any premises have to be de-scoped due to technical or other reasons during the lifetime of a Project Gigabit contract, they will also be considered against the new eligibility criteria and values.
- Active projects in voucher priority areas which have already been approved under the existing criteria and values will remain on the existing criteria and values.

8. Can suppliers cancel projects and resubmit them to access the higher voucher values?

- No. Projects which have already been published have already been reviewed and values approved. They will remain on the existing criteria and existing voucher values.
- Projects should not be cancelled to retrospectively apply higher standard voucher values, in the same way that top-ups cannot be retrospectively added to published projects. The same principle applies.
- The payment claims for these projects will remain at the existing amount already approved for the project, and claims for these payments can be made up until the expiration date of the voucher.



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9. What about projects which communities are currently developing, will they be able to continue based on old criteria as they have invested considerable time?

- We appreciate there may be a small number of projects in development that suppliers and communities have invested time in which have not yet been submitted to BDUK and they may not be accepted under the new criteria.
- While we recognise the effort required to establish projects we also need to ensure public funds are appropriately allocated and unfortunately if a project does not meet the new criteria we will not be able to approve it for voucher funding.
- It may be that an amended version of the original proposed project could satisfy the new eligibility criteria so we would encourage you to explore what potential changes may be possible.
- If you become aware of any individual cases where this will cause an issue, please speak to your Local Delivery Lead. Such cases should only arise where there is an expectation of the network being built through another contract or commercial plan.
- In reality the increased voucher value should make projects more viable and able to reach more rural premises on the edge of current project proposals.

10. Why is BDUK changing the values?

- These changes are a reflection of increasing commercial build and widespread procurements. Increased voucher values will enable suppliers to build networks to premises in even more rural and remote parts of the UK and provide more targeted support for areas outside of Project Gigabit procurements.
- Increasing the voucher values we hope will help accelerate use of vouchers and help unlock vouchers as an option for more premises which suppliers have previously found to be unviable.
- The higher value decreases the amount of take-up needed by suppliers in order to fully fund projects, de-risking these projects.

11. What does this mean for existing top-ups?

- We will be directly contacting all local councils which have an existing top-up about the impact of the changes in each area. You may have been contacted already.



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- It will be each council's choice whether they wish to keep, change or cancel their existing top-up
- We will ask all councils with existing top-ups to sign a new or amended local authority agreement which appropriately reflects the new standard maximum voucher values.
- We appreciate there will likely be internal governance processes you may need to follow in order to make any changes to top-ups if you choose to, and we will support you through this where required.
- Until councils make decisions on their top-ups, all top-ups for new projects will be temporarily paused from 5 December until subsequent updated agreements are signed by each council.

12. Why is BDUK changing the eligibility criteria?

- Ofcom data has been the most reliable source of existing broadband coverage data from the market for us to check whether gigabit broadband is already available since vouchers were originally introduced by us.
- Ofcom data is captured from broadband suppliers three times a year, in January, May and September, and looks at existing coverage only.
- Now we are capturing existing and planned broadband coverage data from suppliers through the National Rolling Open Market Reviews (NR OMR) and Public Reviews (PRs) to inform our Project Gigabit procurement planning, we want to also use this data to determine the commercial broadband footprint and determine voucher eligibility.
- The NR OMR and PR data provides a more accurate reflection of the current broadband landscape and reduces the risk of overbuild of commercial coverage because we may be made aware of planned commercial build through supplier engagement around Project Gigabit procurements, but this will not be recognised in Ofcom's data.

13. What is BDUK planning to do to promote the changes to the voucher scheme?

- As well as informing local councils and suppliers about the changes to GBVS and updating content on the GBVS website and gov.uk where required, BDUK will be updating the existing promotional materials available in the Local Body Library with new branding and messaging for local councils to share with local communities to help publicise the scheme, when appropriate



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- If local councils have a specific communications or publicity request please contact gigabitvoucher@dcms.gov.uk.