

## COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BACKGROUND NOTE

### MOBILE PHONE COVERAGE AND THE MOBILE INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT



#### Westminster Hall Debate

Wednesday 10 February 2016, 4.00pm – 4.30pm

John Glen MP, Conservative, Salisbury

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The Countryside Alliance welcomes this important debate and recognises the importance of good mobile phone coverage in rural areas.

In the countryside mobile connectivity is just as essential, but nowhere near as available, as it is in urban areas. Coverage is patchy and can be unreliable, making life for families and businesses very difficult. Continued poor connectivity in rural areas represents a barrier to economic growth and these gaps and weaknesses need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The Alliance welcomes the Government's commitment to improving rural connectivity and tackling mobile phone partial not-spots around the country. In a landmark deal announced on 18 December 2014 the four network operators announced a £5bn investment in the UK's mobile phone coverage. The deal will guarantee call and text coverage on all networks across 90 per cent of the UK's geographical area by 2017, and coverage including internet access to 85 per cent by the same date. In return the Government agreed to reform the outdated Electronic Communications Code and make it easier for new masts and other infrastructure to be built, something for which the Countryside Alliance has long campaigned.

The Government will also allow many government buildings to be used as sites for mobile infrastructure and will take operators' concerns into account when they review the fees mobile networks pay to government.

However, more needs to be done by the Government and service providers to connect the final 30 per cent of the country, that has no, or only partial, reception. This 30 per cent includes many thousands of rural households.

#### Mobile Communications

- On the 1 December 2015, Ofcom released their report, Connected Nations 2015. The report stated that faster 4G mobile network coverage has increased significantly. All four operators now provide outdoor coverage to 46 per cent of UK premises and three of these operators now cover more than 70 per cent of UK premises.
- However, the report also stated, levels of mobile coverage in rural areas continue to be lower than in urban areas. Outdoor coverage of voice services in rural areas is 72 per cent of premises, compared to 99 per cent of premises in urban areas. Indoor coverage in rural areas is particularly poor, with only 31 per cent of rural premises receiving an indoor voice service, compared to 91 per cent in urban areas.

- A study, also by Ofcom, released on 22 July 2014 revealed that good mobile phone reception and the ability to use your phone or tablet to access the internet are essential to modern rural life.
- Respondents to the study said being able to contact the emergency services, keeping in touch with family and friends and being able to access information, education and entertainment were among the most important services they required.
- This research backs up the Countryside Alliance's view that good broadband and mobile phone services are as important to those who live in the countryside as other basic utilities such as water and energy.
- The last Ofcom annual Communications Market Report showed that half the UK population now use their mobile phone to access the internet.
- A further Ofcom report published on 12 August 2014 looked at mobile phone call quality. The report, based on independent research, showed that whilst 78 per cent of those living in urban areas are satisfied with the service from their mobile phone network, this drops to 67 per cent in rural areas. Those living in the countryside also experience a higher number of failed calls.

### **Mobile Infrastructure Project**

- Some areas of the UK are not provided with any mobile coverage by mobile network operators and other areas receive low quality coverage which results in a poor level of customer experience. In certain areas of the UK, particularly rural areas, there is a limited commercial case for market-driven investment to improve coverage and quality of service.
- Increasing mobile connectivity is vital to ensure business growth, extend access to key public services which are delivered online, and bring an improvement for mobile customers across the UK.
- In October 2011 the Chancellor, George Osborne MP, announced the Government planned to invest up to £150 million to improve mobile coverage in the UK. This investment was supposed to have improved the coverage and quality of mobile services for the 5 to 10 per cent of consumers and businesses that live and work in areas of the UK where mobile coverage is non-existent.
- The Countryside Alliance welcomed the Mobile Infrastructure Project (MIP) when it was announced in 2011. So it was disappointing news when the Culture Secretary, John Whittingdale MP, giving evidence to the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee on 9 September 2015, said the Project will provide as few as 40 masts by the time it is wound up in March 2016.
- The Project announced by Chancellor George Osborne over four years ago, with the aim of building hundreds of masts in rural areas and would benefit around 900,000 premises, will now not deliver on its promise to improve coverage across the country where there is no connectivity. Early in the project MIP was also significantly scaled back from the original plan of 5-10 per cent (900,000 premises) to around 60,000 UK premises. This was a huge disappointment for rural communities and businesses.

- For example the first new mast went live in North Yorkshire in September 2013, but the Project floundered as mast sites struggled to get planning permission and there were many technical difficulties such as delivering a power supply and backhaul capacity.
- The Government must now ensure the £5bn agreement with mobile operators delivers the promised connectivity to rural areas to ensure we have universal coverage.

**Countryside Alliance believes:**

- Mobile connectivity must be able to meet our current demands and have the capacity to grow as we become ever more reliant on digital technology.
- The mobile network is an essential part of national infrastructure in both economic and social terms and should be treated as such.
- We fully support Government proposals to allow the sharing and upgrading of sites, proposed December 2014, as we believe this will ensure rollout of a mobile network which meets the needs of households and businesses.
- The planning system must not become a barrier to upgrading mobile infrastructure and increasing mobile coverage.