

## COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

### MOBILE PHONE COVERAGE



The Voice of the Countryside

### Westminster Hall Debate

### “Mobile coverage in rural areas” (Neil Parish MP, Con, Tiverton and Honiton)

Wednesday 22 March, 16:00-16:30

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#### Background

- The Countryside Alliance has long campaigned for broadband and mobile phone coverage to extend to all rural areas. While progress is being made, many rural communities are still experiencing poor digital connectivity.
- Mobile devices are a vital part of modern life and 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. Access to voice and data services is now essential for health and safety, agriculture, tourism and rural business.
- Continued poor connectivity in rural areas represents a huge missed opportunity for economic development and these gaps and weaknesses need to be addressed as a priority. Coupled with reliable broadband, which is essential for competitive and successful enterprises in a growing digital economy. It is vital that rural communities and businesses have access to effective and affordable digital connectivity if the digital divide between rural and urban areas in the UK is not to grow any wider.
- The Countryside Alliance welcomes the Government commitment to improving rural connectivity and tackling mobile phone partial not-spots around the country. Increasing demand for data, especially in the light of developments in technology, is putting pressures on mobile operators from customers for improved connectivity. In addition, the Government ambition for all government services to be online and households to be digitally connected has resulted in the need to upgrade and improve mobile networks, especially in rural areas.
- The mobile network is a crucial piece of national infrastructure in both economic and social terms and should be treated as such. This is why we welcome the Government commitment to reform the out-dated Electronic Communications Code in the Digital Economy Bill. This should make it easier to upgrade equipment and for new masts and other infrastructure to be built, something the Countryside Alliance has long campaigned for. However, any reform of the Code still needs to reflect the rights of landowners. On this note it is disappointing that the Government abandoned the proposals on land valuations and the principle of market value at the last moment, which has created uncertainty in rural areas.
- The Countryside Alliance welcomed the funding announcements in the Budget earlier this month of £200 million to get full fibre broadband to more homes and businesses and

£16 million for a new 5G technology hub are welcome but the Government must ensure that rural areas are not forgotten in delivering fibre and 5G technology.

- In December 2016 Ofcom released their report on connectivity; Connected Nations 2016. The report acknowledged that the 4G mobile network coverage has increased. However, indoor coverage of voice services across all of the UK's rural areas is poor, with only 50% of premises in these areas served by all operators compared to a national average of 72%. Coverage is particularly poor in Scotland and Wales, both in terms of indoor and geographic coverage.

### **Universal Coverage for Mobile**

- Whilst the commitment to ensure everyone, no matter where they live, has access to a basic level of broadband through a Universal Service Obligation is welcome, the same cannot be said for mobile phone coverage.
- The Government gave away major legal concessions and handed a £1 billion saving to the mobile phone industry through a deal struck in 2014 which stopped the potential introduction of national roaming instead securing a commitment to 90% coverage by 2017.
- Yet the latest available data shows that rural communities are still being left behind:
  - 28% of the UK geographic area is not covered by any operator
  - 47% of premises in rural England do not get any coverage from an operator, 59% in rural Scotland and 68% in rural Wales.
- Even if the mobile phone operators achieve their target of 90% 2G coverage by 2017, this will not be sufficient to enable rural businesses to invest and harness new and emerging technologies.

### **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.

### **For more information please contact:**

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