

Countryside Alliance submission to the DCMS call for evidence on Improving broadband for Very Hard to Reach premises

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Introduction

- The Countryside Alliance works for everyone who loves the countryside and the rural way of life. Our aim is to protect and promote life in the countryside and to help it thrive. With over 100,000 members and supporters we are the only rural organisation working across such a broad range of issues.
- The Countryside Alliance welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the DCMS call for evidence on 'Improving broadband for very hard to reach premises'. A successful rural economy is vital for maintaining a living and working countryside and as we move into a digital age the rural economy is becoming more reliant on digital connectivity. It is therefore essential that the people who live and work in the countryside are able to engage fully in the economic life of the country and that means connecting everyone, even the hard to reach places.
- The Countryside Alliance believes that high speed broadband and mobile connectivity is an essential service alongside water, electricity and gas; but is nowhere near as available in rural areas as it is in urban areas. Slow speeds are a barrier to growth and the lack of connectivity is leading to increased isolation and social exclusion.
- The Government has made a policy decision to deliver more services online to make savings and, in some situations, it will be the only way to access certain services. As such it is only right and fair that everyone has access to broadband to enable them to engage in the digital world. Remote rural communities must not be penalised by paying an excessive connection charge to access basic services due to the Government policy of digital by default.
- The Government is hugely ambitious for a digital Britain, an ambition we support. At a time when we have just left the EU we must ensure Britain is globally competitive, and this will not be the case unless we invest in better digital connectivity that is fit for purpose, responsive to user needs and future proofed in line with the best available technology.

Digital Connectivity

- Delivering superfast broadband and improved mobile phone coverage is a top priority for the Government, business and communities yet, it is often held back by red tape, bureaucracy and poor guidance. If we are to improve digital connectivity then we need to remove and reduce the barriers holding this connectivity back.
- Continued poor connectivity in rural areas also represents a huge, missed opportunity for economic development and these gaps and weaknesses need to be addressed as a priority. The current lack of broadband infrastructure serving small firms threatens the expansion of the rural economy, currently worth £400bn annually. The business opportunity includes 28 per cent of all UK firms and over one million small businesses.
- Business satisfaction with connectivity is lowest in remote rural areas and among those whose job requires them to travel. The British Chambers of Commerce found that 30 per cent of firms in rural areas had unreliable broadband, more than twice as high as those in towns and cities. The rural economy is already 16 per cent less productive than the national average but has such big potential with more people working from home and opting for flexi-working. If you were to level up the countryside by delivering connectivity the economy has the potential to grow by up to £43bn in England alone.
- The need for investment in digital connectivity, particularly in rural areas, is to be welcomed but we must consider all forms of technology when we are trying to connect hard to reach areas. 5G, satellite and fixed wireless should be considered alongside fibre to the premises technology.
- Increased investment in full fibre connectivity by broadband operators is also to be welcomed but this financial commitment must also be delivered in hard-to-reach rural areas to ensure they can also benefit from the opportunity a fibre connection brings.
- COVID-19 has once again highlighted the disparity in broadband connectivity across the country as the networks have struggled to keep up with unprecedented demand which has seen millions of Britons suffering as a result of poor connectivity and outages. We saw a 62 per cent rise in outages in April 2020 and a third of people surveyed had experienced internet issues during lockdown. This impacts everyone from those trying to home school to homeworkers supporting the economy.

Countryside Alliance research into the rural economy

- The Countryside Alliance surveyed its membership on the most important issues that will strengthen the rural economy. We had over 1,000 responses which shows the strength of feeling amongst rural communities about how important the rural economy is to them. The results showed that 70 per cent of respondents felt digital infrastructure was the most important issue in relation to the rural economy followed by the provision of services.
- Our research showed that 70 per cent of respondents were concerned that slow speeds are a barrier to growth, the lack of connectivity was leading to increased

isolation and social exclusion, and that fibre connectivity should be available to all, no matter where they live.

Comments from the survey:

- “Poor internet access from (home), leads to loss of business opportunities. It also adds to toxic emissions, by causing travel which might otherwise be avoided. The loneliness factor must be considered as regards the elderly which can add to potential illnesses linked to loneliness and a concomitant addition to National Health costs. Rapid introduction of fibre-optic broadband is necessary to combat and reduce the above-highlighted issues.”
 - “Employers simply do not set up where digital coverage is thin or lacking. BT Openreach needs to be strictly regulated. Where we live there is no landline broadband and it is common for our phone line to be out of order. We used satellite for a while but have now migrated to 4G. However, that is both expensive and temperamental.”
 - “Problems of safety if an accident takes place. Lack of opportunity to make use of the world wide web for educational purposes. All villages should be connected by now, so start to connect isolated homes as well.”
 - “The inability to react to the changing working environment which in turn leads to the breakdown of community. Good digital connectivity facilitates not just working from home but enables people to work together and form rural hubs or serviced offices which can then support better local amenities.’
- Delivering a strong economy, increased productivity and thriving communities cannot be achieved without recognising the vital role the countryside has to play. The countryside has a key role to play in boosting our productivity and must get its fair share of funding for digital connectivity,

Countryside Alliance calls for

- Government to promote and support alternative technologies, such as satellite and mobile broadband, which can deliver connectivity to remoter rural areas.
- The decision to down grade the commitment to deliver gigabit enabled broadband to all in rural communities must be urgently reviewed. It is unacceptable that the needs of rural communities are once again being ignored.
- Currently, only 1 million homes are being connected a year to superfast. If the Government is going to match its manifesto commitment this needs to increase to 4 million a year. However with the scaling back of the commitment we are concerned the Government will take their foot off the pedal. To deliver the required outcome of levelling up economic opportunity and investing in infrastructure, the Government actually needs to increase funding, deliver regulatory change and reverse its decision to downgrade the rollout programme.
- The USO should be available to everyone, as the name implies. It is necessary to ensure that the most rural, hard-to-reach properties can enjoy the same workable broadband speeds as the rest of the UK. Rural properties should not be priced out of the service. For example, a [householder in the lake district was quoted over £500,000](#)

to install broadband to his home. The neighbouring village, Blindcrake, just one and a half miles away, had BT fibre broadband installed two years ago completely free of charge. BT must review the cost cap to allow neighbours to share costs when the threshold is reached.

- Broadband is not an optional extra in this digital world and rural consumers should not be expected to pay excessive amounts to be connected. As such, properties should be allowed to share the costs under USO, this would ultimately help connect rural residents and, depending on how many individuals were involved, could also bring costs below the cost cap.