

1. Executive Summary

2. The Countryside Alliance believes that high speed broadband and mobile connectivity is an essential service alongside water, electricity and gas; and must be treated as such. Slow speeds are a barrier to growth and the lack of connectivity is leading to increased isolation and social exclusion. Fundamentally, digital connectivity should be available to all, no matter where they live.
3. The need for investment in digital connectivity, particularly in rural areas, is to be welcomed. However, the Government has only committed funding from the National Productivity and Infrastructure Fund until 2021 and if the Government are to deliver on the Future Telecoms Infrastructure Review, which has set out the changes that are needed to give the majority of the population access to 5G, connect 15 million premises to full-fibre broadband by 2025 and provide full-fibre coverage across all of the UK by 2033, then we need a clear funding strategy that goes well beyond this 2021 funding commitment.
4. Delivering superfast broadband and improved mobile phone coverage is a top priority for the Government, business and communities yet, it is 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.
5. 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.
6. The Government is hugely ambitious for a digital Britain, an ambition we support. At a time when Britain is leaving the EU we must ensure Britain is globally competitive in the post-Brexit world, 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.

7. Introduction

8. 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.
9. The Countryside Alliance welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Efra Select Committee inquiry into 'Rural broadband and digital only services'. 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. 1.1 million premises still don't have access to decent broadband, meaning that 17 per cent of rural homes and businesses are unable to receive decent broadband, and 82 per cent can't receive a 4G signal.

10. Research by the Countryside Alliance showed that digital connectivity was ranked the most important issue that could improve the rural economy. 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.

11. 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."

12. What are the barriers to delivering superfast broadband and improved mobile phone coverage in rural areas at an affordable cost to consumers?

13. There are a number of barriers to the roll out of superfast broadband and mobile phone coverage which must be addressed by central and local government, operators and stakeholders. Only by working together will be able to deliver connectivity to all in a cost effective and timely manner.

14. There are three main barriers to roll out:

15. Legislative

- a. Inconsistent application of planning regulations between local authorities – application for a mast in a neighbouring local authority may face different application of planning regulations.
- b. Planning permission/guidance for local authorities such as for masts with high visual impact and for the fixed broadband network such as street furniture and wayleaves.
- c. Access to spectrum for rural providers.
- d. Uncertainty around deploying new sites whilst the market adjusts to the new Electronic Communications Code.

16. Deployment

- a. Lack of viable sites for national providers.
- b. Cost of deployment – the cost of power, backhaul, site rental and wayleaves maybe prohibitive.
- c. Provision of backhaul infrastructure – including power to the sites and fibre. Gaining access to existing power and backhaul facilities maybe challenging.
- d. Street works management - noticing and permit schemes, restriction notices must be streamlined to ensure fees and notice periods are consistent.

17. Communication

- a. Joining up central government's approach to promote mobile deployment and 5G, along with superfast broadband, and raising awareness within local authorities.
- b. Local variations in engagement between network providers and local authorities, and with utility companies.

18. Is enough being done to address the disparity in coverage and digital service provision between rural and urban areas? What is the impact of the urban-rural digital divide on rural communities?

19. 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. 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.

20. Continuing to improve urban broadband speeds without simultaneous improvements in rural coverage risks increasing Britain's rural-urban divide. It is vital to ensure entire communities are not 'left behind' and we avoid digital exclusion – particularly when those excluded live in isolated rural areas. The Campaign to End Loneliness have identified the lack of access to fast broadband in rural areas as a key obstacle in preventing loneliness, particularly among older people – of which the countryside has a disproportionate number.

21. Superfast broadband speeds will allow people to set up their own companies from home, encourage entrepreneurs and is vital for many tech-based industries. If we are not careful, we will leave some rural areas out of this digital revolution. Those without sufficient internet speeds cannot be expected to play a full role in the modern world, and they and their communities will suffer.

22. At a time when Britain is leaving the EU we must ensure Britain is globally competitive in the post-Brexit world, and this will not be the case unless we invest in better broadband.

23. Is the current Universal Service Obligation (USO) adequate for the needs of rural communities and businesses and will it be effectively delivered? Given technological developments, including provision of 5G, will the USO provide the necessary level of connectivity for rural areas in the next decade?

24. The Countryside Alliance welcomed the Digital Economy Act when it came into force and we hope that it will ensure that digital connectivity is delivered in rural areas. One of the main obstacles to high speed broadband and mobile connectivity in rural areas

is the lack of infrastructure able to support high speed connections. The Countryside Alliance also welcomed the introduction of a Universal Service Obligation (USO) of 10Mbit/s for broadband speeds across the country.

25. The purpose of the USO is to give every household the right to request a broadband connection at a minimum speed of a least 10Mbps, up to a reasonable cost threshold, no matter where they live or work. It is being introduced as a safety net for those premises which cannot already obtain a minimum speed of at least 10Mbps.
26. However, we have always been concerned about how the USO is going to be delivered and that adequate resources are allocated to ensure that 10Mbit/s can be accessed in all premises across the UK, including rural areas.
27. We are also concerned that we do not know the true extent of the problem of poor digital coverage. The initial figures quoted by the Government appear to under report the number of homes receiving less than 10Mbps download speed. If there are lessons to be learnt from the BDUK project then it must be that the data was not accurate enough and BT/Openreach must now have a clearer picture of the problem areas.
28. We believe that BT/Openreach must provide the real time data it has gathered through the BDUK contracts and that further modelling work is required to ensure the USO really delivers where it is most needed.
29. The Government is hugely ambitious for a digital Britain, an ambition we support, and coupled with the potential growth of the Internet of Things and our increasing reliance on data we must ensure the USO is fit for purpose, responsive to user needs and future proofed in line with the best available technology.
- 30. Are the Government's recent policy and funding announcements for improving digital connectivity adequate for rural areas, and how robust are the plans for delivery?**
31. The need for investment in digital connectivity, particularly in rural areas, is to be welcomed but we are concerned that the funding announced seems to be focussed on urban areas. There is a danger that people in rural areas will not benefit from the measures announced. Any funding mechanisms must deliver connectivity in both rural and urban areas.

32. Recent Budget measures include:

- **Fibre network** – £740 million allocated from the National Productivity and Investment Fund (NPIF) between now and the end of the financial year 2020/21 to fund digital infrastructure fibre and 5G investment.
- **Rural areas** – The Budget allocates £200 million from the NPIF to pilot innovative approaches to deploying full fibre internet in rural locations, starting with primary schools, and with a voucher scheme for homes and businesses nearby. The first wave of this will include the Borderlands, Cornwall, and the Welsh Valleys.
- **New homes** – Alongside the Budget, the Government is publishing consultations to mandate gigabit-capable connections to new build homes and speed up the delivery of upgraded connections to tenants, making it quicker and easier for communications providers to roll out full fibre networks.

- **5G** - £16 million to create a new National 5G Innovation Network to trial and demonstrate 5G applications.
 - **Suffolk** – The Government has announced that Suffolk is the first local area to be awarded £5.9 million of funding from the third wave of the Local Full Fibre Networks challenge fund, enabling next-generation full fibre connections to key public buildings.
33. Several of the measures announced in the Budgets in recent years including the £200 million NPIF funding to deliver faster broadband for rural businesses, homes and schools will be essential to close the digital divide. However, the Government has only committed funding from the NPIF until 2021 and if the Government are to deliver on the Future Telecoms Infrastructure Review, which has set out the changes that are needed to give the majority of the population access to 5G, connect 15 million premises to full-fibre broadband by 2025, and provide full-fibre coverage across all of the UK by 2033, then we need a clear funding strategy that goes well beyond this 2021 funding commitment.
34. A full fibre strategy is essential to underpin 5G coverage and deliver a turbo charged broadband network which is so vital for our countryside communities. Currently, the UK has only four percent full-fibre connections and if we continue building at the same rate it will be 24 years (2042) before we reach 100 per cent full-fibre coverage.
35. **How well do digital public services work in rural areas where there are poor internet connections? What support or alternatives are available for those in rural areas with poor or no connection to use digital public services and how effective is it?**
36. The Government has an ambition to have as many services online as possible and we applaud this ambition, so as accessing services online becomes an everyday necessity this needs to be matched by connectivity. This is particularly pertinent in the countryside, where in many cases, rural people already find it harder to access these services than those in cities, and frequently have to travel further. The ability to use these services via the internet has the potential to make their lives much easier, but this depends on acceptable internet speeds. It is widely acknowledged that improving rural broadband would have a disproportionately positive impact on rural people's lives.
37. 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. However, it is only right and fair that everyone has access to broadband to enable them to engage in the digital world. However, 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.
- 38. Recommendations**
39. When we leave the EU the Government must seek to be at least as ambitious as the EU in digital connectivity and where possible to exceed EU targets.
40. Ofcom to impose rural coverage obligations to improve mobile coverage in rural areas when they award the 700MHz band.

41. Increased investment in full fibre connectivity by broadband operators is to be welcomed but this financial commitment must be also committed to rural areas to ensure they can also benefit from the opportunities fibre connection brings.
42. Government to promote and support alternative technologies, such as satellite and mobile broadband, which can deliver connectivity to remoter rural areas.
43. Provide guidance on best practice in promoting infrastructure deployment.
44. Develop and implement a clear communication strategy to raise awareness on the benefits of 5G and superfast broadband.
45. Develop a proactive approach towards digital infrastructure and promote a coherent approach across central and local government on priorities for 5G.
46. Update planning legislation to enable swifter delivery mobile and broadband connectivity.