



DEBATE PACK

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Digital infrastructure, connectivity and accessibility

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Summary

This pack has been prepared ahead of the debate to be held in the Commons Chamber on Thursday 3 December 2020 on Digital infrastructure, connectivity and accessibility. The subject for the debate has been nominated by the Backbench Business Committee and the debate will be opened by Esther McVey and Julie Elliott.

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

1. Digital infrastructure and connectivity

Digital infrastructure can be understood as the physical resources – such as broadband and mobile communications – that are needed to enable the use of data and computerised devices / systems.

The Commons Library has published a briefing paper on the Government's policy for building nationwide gigabit-capable [full-fibre broadband](#) (last updated December 2020). Constituency broadband statistics are available on the Library data dashboard: [broadband coverage and speeds](#). The Library has also published an 'Insight' on [Building the UK's digital future](#) (January 2020).

Information published by the Government can be found at Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), [Building Digital UK](#), last updated 19 November 2020.

The National Audit Office in their October 2020 report [Improving Broadband](#) reported that Ofcom and most local stakeholders consider that existing broadband infrastructure held up well to increased data traffic during the pandemic. However, there has been some congestion and outages at local levels, with some stakeholders representing large rural populations reporting that those with poor broadband availability have felt the impact of more sharply during the pandemic (paragraphs 2.3-2.4 of the NAO report).

2. Accessibility and the 'digital divide'

The digital divide is the gap between people in society who have full access to digital technology, such as the internet and computers, and those who do not. There are [numerous reasons](#) why someone may be digitally excluded.¹ These include:

- Not being able to access infrastructure that provides access to the internet, for example living in a location without decent broadband or mobile coverage, or being unable to afford a connection package.
- Not having access to a device such as a smartphone, laptop or tablet which can connect to the internet.
- Not having the skills to use a device and/or navigate the online environment safely and effectively.
- Not having the will or motivation to use the internet and learn the necessary skills.

Concerns about the digital divide have been [particularly acute during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) as internet access has become increasingly important for accessing public services, health information and staying connected to family and friends.² For children, the internet and device access may be [required for home schooling](#)³ and adults [may require additional digital skills for working from home](#).⁴

In 2020, ONS survey data suggested that [96% of households in Great Britain had access to the internet](#), up from 93% in 2019.⁵ In previous years, the ONS published data on those who did not have access to the internet. Of the 7% of survey participants that did not have access in 2019, 61% reported that they felt they did not need it, 34% felt they lacked the skills required to use it and 33% were concerned about security or privacy. In addition, 29% of respondents said that access costs were too high and 28% said equipment costs were too high. The ONS also found that [7.5% of adults had never used the internet](#).⁶

[The UK consumer digital index 2020](#), an annual survey of about 4000 bank customers by Lloyd's Bank, found that, although the number of people in the UK lacking digital skills is declining, 16% of participants could not carry out a full set of seven basic digital tasks (such as connecting a device to a WiFi network and opening an internet browser to find and use websites), and 9% of participants were unable to carry out any of the seven tasks.⁷

The main factors that influence the digital divide in the UK include age, region, socioeconomic status and whether a person has a disability. [ONS](#)

¹ NHS Digital, [What we mean by digital inclusion](#), 21 April 2020

² Good Things Foundation, [Coronavirus and leaving no-one behind](#), 5 March 2020

³ BBC News, ['Digital poverty' in schools where few have laptops](#), 24 April 2020

⁴ Good Things Foundation, [Who needs digital skills now?](#), 11 May 2020

⁵ Office for National Statistics, Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2020, 7 August 2020 [accessed 1 December 2020].

⁶ Office for National Statistics, [Internet users, UK: 2019](#), 24 May 2019

⁷ Lloyd's Bank, [UK Consumer Digital Index 2020](#), pg.38

[survey data](#) from 2019 found that adults over the age of 65 make up the highest proportion of internet non-users.⁸ According to the Lloyds Bank [UK consumer digital index 2019](#), those with a disability are 2.4 times more likely to be internet non-users than those without.⁹ This survey also found that 47% of offline people come from lower income households. The ONS reported that Northern Ireland and the North East of England are the regions with the largest proportions of internet non-users.¹⁰

⁸ Office for National Statistics, [Exploring the UK's Digital Divide](#), 4 March 2019

⁹ Lloyd's Bank, [UK Consumer Digital Index 2019](#), pg 21

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, [Exploring the UK's Digital Divide](#), 4 March 2019

3. Press articles and releases

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

Telegraph, 27 November 2020

[£9bn bill for watered-down broadband pledge](#)

The Centre for Economics and Business Research warns the rollback of plans could widen the UK's digital divide

ISPReview, 25 November 2020

[Government Start £5bn UK Gigabit Broadband Plan for 85%+ by 2025](#)
UPDATE

Guardian, 23 Nov 2020

[Education of poorest pupils in England 'suffers most during Covid isolation'](#)

FT, 27 October 2020

[Schools plan for remote learning rotas as Covid disruption spreads](#)

Move risks worsening 'digital divide' for students without laptops or the internet

Mail Online, 20 October 2020

[Hopes of every UK home and business getting super-fast broadband by 2025 fade... as minister refuses to say how close government is to achieving Tory election pledge,](#)

openDemocracy, 19 October 2020

[COVID-19 has exposed the UK's digital divide. It's time to invest in a full-fibre future](#)

The pandemic has underscored the need to make Internet access a 21st century human right.

Good Things Foundation, 24 Sep 2020

[Digital Nation 2020: Fixing the Digital Divide](#)

BMJ, 1 September 2020

[Covid-19 is magnifying the digital divide](#)

Guardian, 18 Aug 2020

[Homeless people in Britain to receive free phones in connectivity drive](#)

Crisis is handing out thousands of devices and data packages to highlight importance of technology after Covid-19

The Lancet, August 2020

[COVID-19 and the digital divide in the UK](#)

ISPReview, 9 July 2020

[UK Government Appears to Soften 2025 Gigabit Broadband Goal](#)

Telegraph, 15 June 2020

[Cross-party calls for Government to provide internet access and devices to children on free school meals](#)

UN, 11 June 2020

[Digital Divide 'a Matter of Life and Death' amid COVID-19 Crisis, Secretary-General Warns Virtual Meeting, Stressing Universal Connectivity Key for Health, Development](#)

The Guardian, 4 June 2020

[Covid-19 makes it clearer than ever: access to the internet should be a universal right](#)

The World Economic Forum COVID Action Platform, 22 Apr 2020

[Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before](#)

Guardian, 28 April 2020

[Digital divide 'isolates and endangers' millions of UK's poorest](#)

Joseph Rowntree Foundation, April 2020

[Coronavirus response must include digital access to connect us all](#)

Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR), 2020

["Pay the wi-fi or feed the children": Coronavirus has intensified the UK's digital divide](#), Hannah Holmes and Gemma Burgess

4. Parliamentary material

4.1 PQs

[House Of Commons Tabled Parliamentary Question 2019-21 122550](#)

Tabled by: Timms, Stephen | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, what his target is for gigabit broadband coverage by 2025.

Department: Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

30 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Tabled | House of Commons | 122550

[House Of Commons Tabled Parliamentary Question 2019-21 122549](#)

Tabled by: Timms, Stephen | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, whether the £5 billion announced in the 2020 Spring Budget to ensure all homes and businesses can access gigabit broadband by 2025 remains available for that purpose; and if he will make a statement.

Department: Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

30 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Tabled | House of Commons | 122549

(These PQs are due for answer on 3 December 2020)

[Remote Education: Coronavirus](#)

Asked by: Hayes, Helen | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when his Department plans to next publish detailed data, by (a) region and (b) local authority, on the allocation of (i) devices and (ii) 4G broadband provided to schools to support students who are required to learn remotely during the covid-19 outbreak.

Answering member: Nick Gibb | **Party:** Conservative Party |

Department: Department for Education

The Department has invested over £195 million to support remote education and access to online social care, delivering over 220,000 laptops and tablets during the summer term for disadvantaged children who would not otherwise have access to a digital device.

The Department is adding to this support by making over 340,000 additional laptops and tablets available to support disadvantaged children that might experience disruption to their education. Since September, over 100,000 of these have been delivered to schools.

Laptops and tablets are owned by the local authority, trust or school who can lend unused laptops and tablets to children and young people who need them most. Once pupils who have been self-isolating return

to school, schools can choose to reallocate devices if other pupils experience disruption to face-to-face education due to COVID-19.

In the context of significant global demand, the Department has updated its allocation process to more accurately align orders with the number of disadvantaged pupils schools typically have self-isolating, ensuring as many children as possible benefit from receiving a device this term.

The Department recognises that levels of self-isolation may be higher in different areas of the country and that face-to-face education is being prioritised in all eventualities. Where schools need additional devices, they should contact the Department's service team at: covid.technology@education.gov.uk.

This more targeted approach will mean that as many schools and disadvantaged children as possible benefit from receiving a device in the event that their face-to-face education is disrupted. Further data on the number of devices distributed will be released this term.

26 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 119309

[Broadband](#)

Asked by: Onwurah, Chi | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to the Answer of 22 October 2020 to Question 103502, what the Government's year-on-year target is for gigabit rollout in hard-to-reach areas to achieve the 2025 target.

Answering member: Matt Warman | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

The government set out in its National Infrastructure Strategy that it is working with industry to target a minimum of 85% gigabit capable coverage by 2025, but will seek to accelerate roll-out further to get as close to 100% as possible. The government will continue to implement an ambitious programme of work to remove barriers to broadband deployment, and maximise coverage in the hardest to reach areas of the country through our £5 billion UK Gigabit Programme.

We have made rapid progress to date with the support of the industry. Over 1 in 3 (34%) premises can now access gigabit-capable broadband, and we expect that gigabit broadband coverage will reach at least 50% during 2021.

The Spending Review 2020 provided further details on our planned year on year capital spend for 2021-22 to 2024-25, which totals £1.2 billion as part of the £5 billion UK Gigabit Programme. DCMS is continuing to work closely with industry to develop this programme and our year on year rollout plans for these areas.

25 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 114868

[Broadband and Mobile Phones](#)

Asked by: Hayes, Helen | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, what estimate he has made of the number of (a) elderly people and (b) people who are clinically extremely vulnerable to covid-19 who do not have access to (i) a smart phone and (ii) secure broadband; and what steps he is taking to reduce levels of digital exclusion among those groups.

Answering member: Caroline Dinenage | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Estimates based on Ofcom data suggest that between 4,920,000 - 5,780,000 people aged 70+ do not personally use a smartphone. Between 2,390,000 - 3,220,000 people aged 70+ do not have household access to connected devices. We do not have robust data on the digital access of people who are clinically extremely vulnerable to covid-19 and we are seeking to improve our understanding of this issue.

In March, the government agreed a set of voluntary commitments with telecommunications providers to support and protect vulnerable consumers and those who might become vulnerable as a result of Covid-19. This included a commitment to work with customers who are finding it difficult to pay their bills to ensure that they are treated fairly and appropriately supported. The Government also brokered a deal with providers which have allowed half a million NHS staff to benefit from better connectivity, and also ensured that a number of websites, including the NHS website, are zero-rated.

The introduction of the digital entitlement means that from August 2020, adults with no or low digital skills can undertake new digital skills qualifications up to Level 1 free of charge. The Government also supports the Future Digital Inclusion programme focussing on those hardest to reach. Since 2014, the programme has helped over 1.4 million people to gain the digital skills they need for life and work.

16 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 114266

[Digital Technology](#)

Asked by: Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick | **Party:** Non-affiliated

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to close the digital divide.

Answering member: Baroness Barran | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

We continue to take steps to roll out gigabit capable broadband to every home and business in the UK, including a £5bn investment ensuring the whole of the UK benefits from a world class broadband infrastructure. Current gigabit coverage is over 27% of the UK and

growing quickly, this is compared to under 5% just two years ago. Mobile coverage is also improving, thanks to our landmark Shared Rural Network agreement with the mobile network operators - the first of its kind in the world - 95% of the UK will have 4G coverage by the end of 2025.

The introduction of the Digital Entitlement means that adults with no or low digital skills can undertake new digital qualifications up to Level 1 free of charge. The Government also supports the Future Digital Inclusion Programme. Since 2014, the programme has helped over 1.4 million people to gain the digital skills they need for life and work.

In response to Covid-19 the Government invested over £195 million to support remote education. Part of this included delivering over 220,000 laptops and tablets over the summer term for vulnerable and disadvantaged children who would not otherwise have access. We are also making available 250,000 additional laptops and tablets (100,000 of these have been delivered since September) for disadvantaged children to supplement this in the event face-to-face schooling is disrupted as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

06 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Lords | HL9574

[Broadband](#)

Asked by: Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick | **Party:** Non-affiliated

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they are on track to meet their target of full-fibre, gigabit-capable broadband by 2025.

Answering member: Baroness Barran | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

The Government remains committed to delivering nationwide gigabit connectivity as soon as possible. Our ambition is to deliver this by 2025. We recognise that this is a challenging ambition. We support industry's plans to deliver gigabit broadband to the most commercial parts of the UK (c.80% of the country) and will continue to take action to remove barriers to deployment to help them deliver this by 2025.

Building Digital UK (BDUK) is currently in the process of mobilising the new £5 billion UK Gigabit Programme which was announced in the Spring Budget. Procurements will commence in 2021.

According to Thinkbroadband (<https://labs.thinkbroadband.com/local/>) as of 27 October, coverage at UK premises for different broadband speeds is currently:

- Superfast (30Mbps) = 96.50%
- Ultrafast (100Mbps) = 63.27%
- Gigabit (1,000Mbps) = 27.52%
- Full Fibre (Gigabit+) = 17.49%

Virgin Media are in the process of activating gigabit services across their entire network by the end of 2021, and this currently covers over 52% of the UK. BT Openreach and CityFibre also have multi-billion pound fibre rollout programmes underway so a leap in gigabit coverage during

2021 is anticipated. This planned build predominantly covers urban areas so DCMS's focus is on stimulating build in the more rural and disadvantaged areas of the UK where the commercial market will not build unaided.

The government has invested significant amounts in digital infrastructure over the last decade. The DCMS portfolio of active projects is currently c.£4 billion (detailed below) and in the Spring Budget, a further £5 billion of investment was announced for the hardest to reach areas of the UK. More details regarding the programme will follow in the Autumn Spending Review.

05 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Lords | HL9575

[Broadband: Finance](#)

Asked by: The Lord Bishop of St Albans

To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the announcement that the long-term spending review will be replaced by a one-year spending review, whether plans to service the UK with fibre broadband by 2025 will be included as a multi-year capital allocation priority infrastructure project.

Answering member: Lord Agnew of Oulton | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Treasury

The Spending Review, which will be delivered on 25 November, will set out the government's spending plans.

The government recognises the importance of connectivity both to the economy and to people's lives. We are committed to nationwide gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible, and are taking a number of steps to achieve this. The March Budget this year committed £5 billion to support the rollout of gigabit-capable broadband in the hardest to reach areas.

03 Nov 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Lords | HL9493

[Broadband](#)

Asked by: Onwurah, Chi | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, whether the Government is on target to meet its 2025 gigabit capable broadband rollout target.

Answering member: Matt Warman | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

The Government is committed to delivering nationwide coverage of gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible. According to ThinkBroadband, full fibre coverage now stands at 17%, up from 9% a year ago, with gigabit coverage at 27%. This means that over 1 in 4 premises can now access gigabit-capable connections.

We will continue to take action to remove barriers to meeting the target, to hasten network rollout and to ensure that those in the hardest to reach areas are not left behind. This is why we allocated £5

billion in the last budget to invest in gigabit rollout in the hardest to reach areas of the country.

20 Oct 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 102811

[Covid-19: School Students Learning From Home](#)

Asked by: Lord Watson of Invergowrie (Lab) | **Party:** Labour Party

My Lords, as my noble friend Lady McDonagh said, the coronavirus lockdown exposed the digital divide in education, with around three-quarters of a million disadvantaged young people missing schoolwork due to a lack of a computer or internet access at home. The Government's announcement last week of 100,000 more laptops, welcome though it is, in that situation is really quite inadequate. Yet, seemingly oblivious to that point, last week the Government also announced that schools and colleges were to be given a new legal duty to provide online education to students at home on the same basis as in the classroom. Can the Minister say whether sanctions will be brought to bear on schools unable to fully deliver online education, even where that is as a result of the Government failing to provide adequate connectivity to students?

Answered by: Baroness Berridge (Con) | **Party:** Conservative Party

My Lords, the direction is to provide remote education, and the announcement was a further 250,000 laptops, so 470,000 laptops have been delivered. It was to give certainty and assurance to parents in relation to the provision of remote education; a lot has been provided but sometimes it has not been consistent. There will obviously be supportive conversations to help schools deliver. We have also given thousands of schools the source of the platforms that they need and the training, through demonstrator schools, to enable them to do this, but there will be a supportive conversation if they are not meeting the requirements of the direction.

05 Oct 2020 | Oral questions - Supplementary | Answered | House of Lords | House of Lords chamber | 806 c383

[Broadband and Mobile Phones](#)

Asked by: Jones, Ruth

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, what recent steps his Department has taken to increase mobile and broadband coverage.

Answering member: Matt Warman | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

The Government is committed to delivering nationwide coverage of gigabit capable broadband as soon as possible. This will be done through promoting network competition and commercial investment wherever possible and by intervening with public subsidy where necessary.

To deliver this we are taking action to reduce barriers to commercial deployment including through the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill currently before Parliament. This will make it easier to connect tenanted properties with an unresponsive landlord. At Budget 2020, we also committed to invest £5 billion to deliver gigabit capable deployment to the hardest to reach areas across the UK.

This investment is on top of our existing funding for gigabit broadband, including the £200 million Rural Gigabit Connectivity programme. In addition in March 2020 the Government's broadband Universal Service Obligation went live. This provides everyone in the UK with the legal right to request an upgraded broadband connection that provides a minimum download speed of 10 Mbps and upload speed of 1 Mbps.

With regards to mobile connectivity, the Government announced in March 2020 that it had agreed a £1 billion deal with the mobile network operators to deliver the Shared Rural Network. This will see operators collectively increase mobile phone coverage throughout the UK to 95% by the end of 2025, underpinned by legally binding coverage commitments.

The Government is also committed to being a world leader in 5G technology and providing a 5G signal to a majority of the population by 2027. As a part of this, we have invested millions in a programme of 5G Testbeds and Trials, including the recent £30 million 5G Create competition.

01 Jul 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 64332

[Broadband: Rural Areas](#)

Asked by: Cameron, Dr Lisa | **Party:** Scottish National Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, what plans his Department has to work with internet providers throughout the UK to ensure that rural areas have adequate level of connectivity.

Answering member: Matt Warman | **Party:** Conservative Party |

Department: Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

The UK Government has legislated to implement the Universal Service Obligation (USO), which launched on 20th March 2020. The USO is a UK-wide measure which provides eligible households with the legal right to request a broadband connection that provides download speeds of at least 10Mbps and an upload speed of at least 1Mbps up to a Reasonable Cost Threshold of £3,400 per premise. The eligible premises are predominantly located in rural areas.

In addition, the Government's Superfast programme has invested more than £1.8bn of public money, to connect over 5.2 million homes and businesses to superfast broadband, providing download speeds of at least 24 Mbps. Over 96% of the UK now has access to these speeds. Building Digital UK (BDUK) continues to work closely with Local Authorities and Devolved Administrations to deliver improved

connectivity through the programme, overwhelmingly focussing on premises in rural areas.

The Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme, which is part of the Government's £200 million Rural Gigabit Connectivity programme, provides vouchers of up to £3,500 for SMEs and up to £1,500 for residents in rural areas to connect to gigabit-capable broadband. This government will also be investing an additional £5 billion to ensure that premises in the hardest to reach areas are able to access gigabit-capable broadband.

Alongside this investment in broadband, the Government announced in March 2020 that it had agreed a £1 billion deal with the mobile network operators to deliver the Shared Rural Network. This will see operators collectively increase mobile phone coverage throughout the UK to 95% by the end of 2025, underpinned by legally binding coverage commitments.

01 Jul 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 64222

[Broadband: Infrastructure](#)

Asked by: Nicolson, John | **Party:** Scottish National Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, what assessment he has made of the contribution of the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill towards meeting the Government's target of delivering gigabit-capable connectivity for all by 2025.

Answering member: Matt Warman | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

The Government remains committed to providing gigabit-capable connections to every home and business in the country as soon as possible.

The Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill contributes to that commitment. It creates a faster, cheaper process than that which currently exists, so as to allow operators to apply to courts for rights under the Electronic Communications Code ("the Code") to install infrastructure and provide a connection. It applies only where a landowner (or otherwise 'required grantor') is repeatedly unresponsive to an operator's attempts to agree to those rights for access.

It is also necessary for those attempts to have been prompted in the first place by a request made to the operator by a tenant, for the operator to provide a service.

The Bill applies to multiple dwelling buildings (e.g. blocks of flats) of which there are an estimated 450,000 in the UK and housing around 10 million people. Information provided by the industry indicates that approximately 40% of operators' notices to the owners of multiple dwelling buildings attempting to agree permission to install infrastructure receive no response. This leaves residents in those properties unlikely to receive faster, more reliable, more resilient

broadband. The Bill addresses this issue by providing for a specific process allowing operators to apply for rights under the Code.

As regards any further changes to the legislation regulating operator rights to build infrastructure on privately owned land, my department is working closely with stakeholders to understand whether the existing statutory framework supports delivery of the 2025 targets. This includes assessing whether Government interventions - including possible further legislative reforms - may be of assistance in achieving the 2025 targets.

08 Jun 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 52105

4.2 Debates

[Telecommunications \(Security\) Bill](#)

30 Nov 2020 | Proceeding contributions | House of Commons | House of Commons chamber | 685 cc74-1247

[Remote Education: Self-isolating Pupils](#)

20 Oct 2020 | Proceeding contributions | House of Commons | House of Commons chamber | 682 cc1035-1042

[Universal Service Obligation for Broadband](#)

08 Oct 2020 | Proceeding contributions | House of Commons | House of Commons chamber | 681 cc1135-1142

[UK Telecommunications](#)

14 Jul 2020 | Proceeding contributions | House of Commons | House of Commons chamber | 678 cc1373-1394

[Covid-19: Recovery Strategies](#)

11 Jun 2020 | Proceeding contributions | House of Lords | House of Lords chamber | 803 cc1851-1893

4.3 Statement

[Telecoms Update](#)

Member: Oliver Dowden

Department: Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

I wish to inform the House that the Government has today published its 5G Diversification Strategy, which sets out the Government's approach to building a resilient, open and sustainable 5G supply chain.

Digital connectivity is now a core part of the everyday lives of millions of people across the UK. It is fundamentally changing the way we live, work and spend time together.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, connectivity has allowed us to stay in touch with family and friends, and to stay plugged in while working remotely and access the content and services we need.

With more and more activity happening online, ensuring security in the networks which provide our connectivity is of paramount importance to this Government.

Looking forward, we are now developing world-class next generation technologies, such as 5G and full fibre, which will promote greater connection, drive growth and provide us with the services of the future. But to fully realise the benefits of these technological advances, we need to have confidence in the security and resilience of the infrastructure on which they are built.

That is why we conducted the Telecoms Supply Chain Review to look at the long-term security of our 5G and full fibre networks. It is why in January we announced our decision to exclude high risk vendors from the core of the network, exclude high risk vendors from sensitive sites, and limit their overall presence in the access network to 35%. It is also why we took the decision in July to set out a clear path to the complete removal of Huawei equipment from our 5G network.

Through the Telecommunications (Security) Bill, we have introduced legislation that will place these decisions on a statutory footing and set out a new, robust security framework for the UK telecoms sector. This will establish the UK as one of the toughest regimes in the world for telecoms security and resilience.

But looking to the future, there is more that we can do. The findings of the Telecoms Supply Chain Review highlighted the need for the Government to intervene in the market to create a more diverse and competitive supply chain in the longer term.

The Review underscored the fact that a pronounced lack of supplier diversity has developed in the access network supply chain. This lack of competition has restricted choice in the sector and will continue to pose a risk to the security and resilience of our networks if not addressed.

These findings have made it clear that our current market structure is no longer fit-for purpose and that without Government intervention, it is highly likely that the current market structure will persist.

Therefore, it is essential that we take action to address this issue. Today's strategy will deliver lasting and meaningful change in the 5G supply chain and pave the way for a vibrant and dynamic market. A market where competition and innovation bring forward new, open deployment models; where our networks are flexible, made up of an array of suppliers; and where all operators and suppliers adopt the

security standards that will ensure that our networks are robust and resilient.

To realise this ambition, we need to strike a balance between fundamentally shifting the market structure towards our long-term vision and ensuring that we can also guarantee the reliability of supply to our networks in the near term.

We have therefore set out a balanced approach to diversification which will see targeted measures introduced across three separate strands of activity;

- Supporting incumbent suppliers;
- Attracting new suppliers into the UK market; and
- Accelerating open-interface solutions and deployment

The decision to commit to the removal of Huawei equipment from our 5G networks was the right decision for the UK's telecoms networks, for our national security and our economy - both now and in the long term. However, it brings with it a resilience risk as we become more dependent on the remaining suppliers for our telecoms networks. This strategy means that we can mitigate that resilience risk as we approach the complete removal of Huawei from our 5G networks in 2027.

However, this strategy is about more than that. It is about implementing measures across these strands to facilitate a competitive, diverse and open supply market, which will support economic growth and innovation as the UK adopts next-generation technologies.

We recognise that there is a sharp need to work at pace to make early progress on diversification. As a first step towards delivering our long-term vision, the Government has committed an initial investment of up to £250m, to kick off work to deliver our key priorities.

This will allow us to take forward specific measures as an absolute priority, such as the establishment of a world-class National Telecoms Lab, increasing UK influence in telecoms standards setting and beginning to dismantle the key barriers to diversification.

These measures will be partnered by immediate steps we are taking to accelerate the development of open-interface solutions. The Government will be funding the NEC NeutORAN project as part of the wider 5G Testbeds and Trials programme, which will showcase the latest innovations in the Radio Access Network space. We are also partnering with Ofcom and Digital Catapult to fund the SmartRAN Open Network Innovation Centre (SONIC), an industry-facing testing facility for interoperable solutions.

Alongside this, the Government recognises that this is a global issue which affects many of our international allies. As such, we will be seeking to lead a global coalition like-minded partners to mount a coordinated international approach to diversification.

These next phases of work will be led by the recently established Telecoms Diversification Taskforce, an expert panel chaired by Lord Ian Livingston. The Taskforce will be advising government as we design and

develop targeted measures across the three strands of our strategy. It will also support us in our work to look beyond 5G and address diversity in the full fibre and wider telecoms supply chain going forward.

As the Taskforce does so, the Government will be working closely with players across the telecoms industry to explore opportunities to establish homegrown capability within the wider UK tech industry through R&D investment and fostering key skills.

This strategy presents a significant opportunity to position the UK as a growing power in telecoms and set the UK's telecoms industry apart, by securing a position at the forefront of new, cutting-edge mobile technologies. By acting now, we are in a position to lead the global telecoms industry towards a more open, competitive and innovative standard - with UK companies setting an example across the sector.

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5. Reports

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors: First Report](#), Third Report of Session 2019–21, HC 291, 23 July 2020 (p48-51)

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Good Things Foundation, [COVID-19 Response Report](#), July 2020

Lloyds Bank, [UK Consumer Digital Index 2020](#)

National Audit Office, [Improving Broadband](#), October 2020

Ofcom, [Connected Nations 2019, UK report](#), 18 March 2020

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