

**Debate Pack**

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# Access to broadband services

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A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for Wednesday 6 September at 2.30pm on access to broadband. The debate will be opened by Alyn Smith MP.

# 1 Background

Ofcom, the telecommunications regulator, conducts ongoing research into the extent and causes of digital exclusion. Its most recent report, [Digital exclusion: A review of Ofcom's research on digital exclusion among adults in the UK](#), was published in March 2022. It defines 'digital exclusion' in terms of three inter-related aspects:

- Access – people may be digitally excluded because they do not have access to the internet at home or elsewhere;
- Ability – people may lack the skills or confidence to navigate the online environment safely and knowledgeably;
- Affordability – people may struggle to afford access to the internet or an internet-enabled device (such as a PC or smartphone).

Ofcom's [2023 Technology Tracker](#) estimates that 7% of UK households did not have internet access at home. This is down from around 11% in 2020 and 24% in 2011. The prevalence of digital exclusion varies greatly depending on age and socio-economic status. For example, 18% of households in [socio-economic band DE](#) say they don't have internet access, as well as 18% of people aged over 65 years.

The Digital Poverty Alliance, an advocacy group, argues that absolute measures of on- or offline are now less relevant than relative differences in digital access:

In highly digitised societies like the UK, differential or relative access – such as differences in speed, reliability, and hardware have a significant impact on an individual's degree of digital inclusion or exclusion.

... Today's bar for access to connectivity and devices is higher than ever before because the digital world is more pervasive and demanding than ever before. A 10 Mbps connection speed is sufficient for doing e-mails and loading most static websites, but to livestream a Zoom call, connections need to be much faster; to conduct several Zoom calls simultaneously in the same household requires a connection that is faster still. This level of connection is not a luxury. It is increasingly required to access online learning, interview for jobs, and more.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Digital Poverty Alliance, [Digital poverty evidence review](#), June 2022, p37-38

## 1.1

# Benefits of better broadband access

The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee report, [Digital exclusion](#), discusses some commonly cited societal benefits of improving digital connectivity, including:

- enhanced productivity and employment opportunities;
- new business opportunities;
- tackling digital exclusion and loneliness;
- addressing educational inequalities;
- efficiency benefits for public services through online access.<sup>2</sup>

Respondents to an inquiry into rural productivity by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse said that the main impact of better internet access would be to “give businesses and individuals the freedom to choose where to locate.” The Internet Service Providers Association argued that digital infrastructure could reverse the “brain drain” from rural to urban areas by making it easier to set up and run a business.<sup>3</sup>

A 2018 report commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport found that the government’s £780 million investment in superfast broadband between 2012 and 2016 had helped generate 49,000 jobs in target areas and increased local business turnover by almost £9 billion per year.<sup>4</sup>

The Countryside Alliance has noted that enabling remote working could have wider benefits for rural areas:

If we get our digital connectivity right, we will see a renaissance in our rural communities, with more people working from home, using local shops and other services, money will stay in that community, services will grow and rural communities will need less support from government to keep essential services and rural life going.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Digital exclusion](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, Ch 3

<sup>3</sup> APPG for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse, [Levelling up the rural economy: an inquiry into rural productivity](#), 26 April 2022, p27-28

<sup>4</sup> DCMS, [Evaluation of the economic impact and public value of the Superfast Broadband Programme](#), August 2018

<sup>5</sup> Countryside Alliance, [Written evidence to the DCMS Select Committee, Broadband and the road to 5G](#), April 2020

## 1 Digital exclusion

Even in areas where there is good digital infrastructure available, a digital divide may still exist for individuals who are not able to use or access digital services.

There is no cross-government strategy specifically on tackling digital exclusion. The most recent digital inclusion strategy was published in 2014, with a target completion date of 2020.

In evidence to the Lords' Communications and Digital Committee, the minister for tech and the digital economy, Paul Scully, said that the government's view is that "we do not need a new strategy".<sup>6</sup> The government's current approach to digital inclusion was set out in response to a Parliamentary Question in May 2022 (PQ 5447).<sup>7</sup> The then-minister, Chris Philip, said that the government was focused on digital skills and ensuring people have access to the internet, either at home on low-cost tariffs or in public locations such as libraries.

The Lords' Committee argued in its report that the absence of a digital inclusion strategy showed that government had "taken its eye off the ball". While it acknowledged the range of initiatives that successive governments had introduced, the Committee said that it had "no confidence" that digital exclusion was a priority for DSIT.

The government has not yet responded to this report.

Aspects of digital inclusion are devolved and the Scottish and Welsh Governments have both published national strategies.

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<sup>6</sup> House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Digital exclusion](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, paras 59

<sup>7</sup> [PQ 5447 - Internet: Disadvantaged](#), 25 May 2022

## 2 Access to broadband

### 2.1 Targets

The government's target is for 85% of UK premises have access to gigabit broadband (download speeds of at least 1 gigabit per second/1 Gbps) by 2025, and 99%+ by 2030.<sup>8</sup> This target is a reduction from the Conservative Party's 2019 manifesto commitment, which pledged to deliver nationwide gigabit-broadband by 2025.<sup>9</sup>

The 2030 target is considered more realistic by industry stakeholders but the delay from 2025 has been described as a "kick in the teeth" for rural communities.<sup>10</sup> As 80% of premises are expected to be reached by commercial investment by 2025, the delay primarily affects the 20% of premises that will require public subsidies.

The National Infrastructure Commission's Infrastructure Progress Review 2023 concluded that the government's targets are likely to be met.<sup>11</sup>

Further discussion of the government's targets for broadband can be found in section 2.2 of the Library briefing, [Gigabit broadband in the UK: Government targets, policy, and funding](#).

### 2.2 Broadband coverage and speeds

Official data on broadband connectivity and speeds in the UK is released by Ofcom in its [Connected Nations reports](#). Reports are published annually, with shorter updates in the Spring and Autumn. You can view the most recent data for constituencies and small areas on our interactive dashboard [Constituency data: broadband coverage and speeds](#).

The table below shows connectivity data for the nine English regions, plus Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, for January 2023. It shows superfast broadband availability (the percentage of premises able to receive download speeds of at least 30 megabits per second/30 Mbps) and gigabit broadband availability.

The table shows how coverage differs in rural and urban areas, except in London, which is almost entirely urban.

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<sup>8</sup> DLUHC, [Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), 2 February 2022; [PQ 116941 - Broadband](#), 7 February 2022

<sup>9</sup> [Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019](#), December 2019

<sup>10</sup> BBC News, [Gigabit broadband: Watered-down plans a 'kick in the teeth'](#), 26 November 2020

<sup>11</sup> NIC, [Infrastructure Progress Review 2023](#), 27 March 2023, p22

Broadband connectivity in the UK, January 2023						
Country or region	Superfast broadband availability (% of premises)			Gigabit broadband availability (% of premises)		
	Rural areas	Urban areas	Total	Rural areas	Urban areas	Total
East Midlands	93%	99%	97%	45%	84%	71%
East of England	94%	99%	97%	43%	81%	68%
London	-	-	97%	-	-	83%
North East	93%	98%	97%	46%	82%	72%
North West	92%	98%	97%	46%	78%	73%
South East	93%	98%	97%	49%	78%	71%
South West	89%	97%	94%	41%	79%	64%
West Midlands	91%	98%	97%	43%	84%	76%
Yorkshire & Humber	94%	98%	97%	48%	84%	75%
Scotland	77%	98%	94%	25%	76%	66%
Wales	92%	98%	95%	36%	71%	55%
Northern Ireland	89%	99%	96%	77%	95%	89%
<b>UK</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>98%</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>72%</b>

Source: Ofcom, [Connected Nations update Spring 2023 underlying data](#)

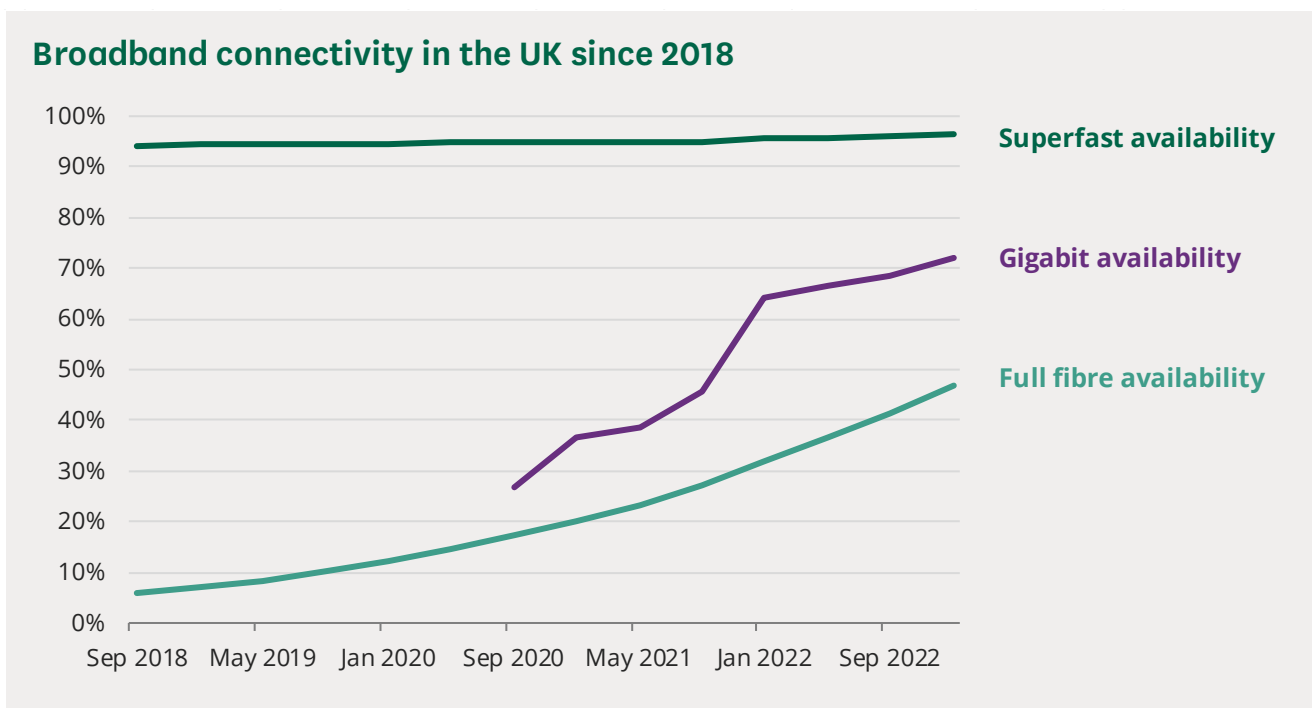
The table below shows the percentage of broadband lines in rural and urban areas that were receiving speeds under 10 Mbps or speeds over 30 Mbps in summer 2022. Lines in rural areas were more likely to be receiving speeds under 10 Mbps, and less likely to be receiving speeds over 30 Mbps.

Fast and slow broadband connections in the UK, summer 2022						
Country or region	Percentage of lines receiving speeds under 10 Mbps			Percentage of lines receiving speeds over 30 Mbps		
	Rural areas	Urban areas	Total	Rural areas	Urban areas	Total
East Midlands	5%	4%	4%	80%	86%	84%
East of England	6%	3%	4%	78%	87%	84%
London	-	-	4%	-	-	85%
North East	6%	5%	5%	78%	84%	82%
North West	7%	4%	4%	78%	86%	84%
South East	6%	4%	5%	77%	86%	83%
South West	9%	4%	6%	72%	83%	79%
West Midlands	8%	4%	5%	77%	86%	84%
Yorkshire & Humber	6%	6%	6%	78%	83%	81%
Scotland	14%	4%	6%	66%	84%	80%
Wales	9%	4%	6%	76%	87%	82%
Northern Ireland	14%	3%	7%	66%	89%	81%
<b>UK</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>83%</b>

Source: Ofcom, [Connected Nations update Spring 2023 underlying data](#)

The chart below shows changes in broadband availability in the UK since September 2018. Ofcom first published data on gigabit broadband availability for September 2020, so the purple line is not present before that date. Data is present for full fibre availability (“fibre to the premises”) over the whole period, so this is also included. Not all gigabit-capable lines are full fibre. There is an explanation of the different broadband technologies in the Library briefing, [Gigabit broadband in the UK: Government targets, policy, and funding](#).

Superfast broadband availability has increased from 94% to 96% since September 2018. Gigabit broadband availability saw a large jump in late 2021, corresponding with [Virgin Media O2’s upgrade to its network](#).



Source: Ofcom, [Connected Nations data, various editions](#)

## 2.3 Public funding for broadband

There is no central government funding specifically to help with the monthly cost of broadband subscriptions. Some broadband providers do offer discounted tariffs for low-income customers, as discussed in section 3.2 below. Public funding is instead focused on improving access by rolling out broadband infrastructure.

The government has promised £5 billion to subsidise the roll-out of gigabit-broadband to the ‘hardest to reach’ premises in the country that will not be reached by private investment (20% of the UK). This is around 5 million premises, mostly in rural areas.

The funding programme is called [Project Gigabit](#). It is delivered by Building Digital UK (BDUK), an executive agency within the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT).

Project Gigabit has three main parts:

- A series of procurements subsidising the roll-out of gigabit-capable broadband in specific areas. Broadband suppliers bid for contracts to build in each area.
- Vouchers worth up to £4,500 for residents and businesses in eligible rural areas to subsidise the cost of a new gigabit-capable connection. A [postcode-checker](#) on the voucher scheme website allows individuals to see if they are in an eligible area.
- Funding to connect public sector buildings such as schools (called ‘GigaHubs’).

BDUK publishes [quarterly progress updates](#) that provide indicative timetables for procurements across the UK.

Telecommunications is a reserved matter and Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are all part of Project Gigabit. However, the devolved administrations also have their own broadband roll-out projects ongoing that are delivering gigabit-capable connections. These are: the [R100 programme](#) in Scotland, [Superfast Cymru](#) in Wales and [Project Stratum](#) in Northern Ireland.

R100 and Superfast Cymru were initially launched under the government’s previous funding programme to support the rollout of superfast broadband. Further information can be found in the Library briefing, [Superfast broadband in the UK](#).

## 2 The Universal Service Obligation

The [Universal Service Obligation](#) (USO) is a legal right to request a “decent and affordable” broadband connection up to a cost threshold of £3,400 per premises. ‘Decent’ means download speeds of at least 10 megabits per second (Mbps), and ‘affordable’ means less than £54 per month.

The government estimates that 500,000 premises do not have access to a ‘decent’ broadband connection. Of these 65,000 may be eligible for the USO. The other 435,000 either have access to mobile broadband offering



equivalent speeds or are included in a government-funded broadband rollout.<sup>12</sup>

The Lords Communications and Digital Committee heard from stakeholders that 10Mbps no longer constitutes ‘decent’ broadband.<sup>13</sup> The Rural Services Network, for example, argued that the USO should be upgraded to 25-30Mbps.

Ofcom has a duty to review the terms of the USO when at least 75% of UK premises have taken up ‘superfast’ broadband (download speeds of over 30 Mbps). Ofcom reported in December 2022 that 73% of premises have done so.

Further information can be found in the Library briefing, [The Universal Service Obligation \(USO\) for Broadband](#).

## Funding for very remote premises

The government expects that there will be a small number of ‘very hard to reach’ premises that will be too expensive to reach by fixed broadband even with public subsidies. In a written statement in April 2023, the government said that it will “bring forward additional policy measures later this year” to help these premises get faster internet using wireless technologies instead. This includes an £8 million fund to help the most remote premises (around 35,000) purchase satellite broadband.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.4

## Commercial investment

As noted above, public funding for broadband is focused on the 20% hardest to reach premises. The rest are expected to be reached through private investment alone by 2025.

To help achieve this, the government and Ofcom have introduced a series of policy reforms intended to make it easier to build broadband networks.<sup>15</sup> Reforms include:

- Introducing the [Telecommunications Infrastructure \(Leasehold Property\) Act 2021](#), which provides an expedited process for operators to gain access to connect blocks of flats if the landlord is unresponsive. The Act

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<sup>12</sup> [HL6618 – Broadband: Standards](#), 24 March 2023

<sup>13</sup> House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Digital exclusion](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, paras 123-126

<sup>14</sup> [HCWS720](#), 18 April 2023

<sup>15</sup> See House of Commons Library, [Gigabit broadband in the UK: Government targets, policy, and funding](#), July 2023, section 3

came into force on 26 December 2022 in England and Wales and on 1 July 2023 in Scotland;

- Introducing [the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022](#). The Act makes changes to the [Electronic Communications Code](#), the legislation that governs the rights of operators to access land for the purpose of building and maintaining telecommunications networks. The reforms make it easier for operators to gain rights to share and upgrade telecoms infrastructure located on public and private land;
- Collaborating with the Department for Transport to facilitate street works.<sup>16</sup>

Reforms have also sought to encourage new entrants (called alternative network operators, or ‘altnets’) to compete with the incumbent, Openreach (part of BT). There are now numerous altnets investing in full fibre networks. The larger operators include City Fibre and Hyperoptic. There are many more operating on a local level, including Jurassic Fibre (south west England), Wight Fibre (Isle of Wight), and Ogi (south Wales).

One consequence of this is a phenomenon called ‘overbuild’, where multiple operators build separate networks in the same location. An analysis of full fibre rollout plans conducted for the Financial Times found that network operators collectively have plans to build to around 80 million premises, far more than the total of 31 million in the UK.<sup>17</sup>

Some commentators have noted from a digital equality perspective that build plans are not evenly distributed across the country, as there is more incentive to build in areas where there are a large number of potential customers. The FT estimated that by 2030, around 3 million homes in wealthier and more densely populated areas could have more than five fibre network providers to choose from, while 1 million in poorer and rural areas could have none. Ofcom has calculated that, if existing commercial and subsidised deployments go to plan, 96% of urban households in the UK will have access to gigabit broadband in March 2025, compared to 66% of rural properties.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, others have argued that overbuild is preferable to underbuild. Ian Morris, of telecoms news website Light Reading, notes that until recently the “dearth of infrastructure competition gave Openreach no market incentive to

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<sup>16</sup> See House of Commons Library, [Gigabit broadband in the UK: Government targets, policy, and funding](#), July 2023, section 3; House of Commons Library, [Building broadband and mobile infrastructure](#), December 2022

<sup>17</sup> FT, [Broadband market inequalities test Westminster’s hopes of levelling up](#), 19 June 2022 [subscription required]

<sup>18</sup> Ofcom, [Connected nations 2022: supplementary report on planned network deployments](#), November 2022, p9

invest in full-fiber networks” and that, as a result, the UK was “stuck at the bottom of European full-fiber rankings”.<sup>19</sup>

The Government’s view remains that it “welcomes” Ofcom’s approach of encouraging “competitive build in the majority of the UK”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Light Reading, [Despite critics, fiber rollout is a rare UK success story](#), 20 June 2022

<sup>20</sup> [PQ 106697 – Broadband: Optical Fibres](#), 21 January 2022

### 3

## Affordability of communications services

Ofcom monitors the [affordability of communications services](#) by conducting surveys. Survey participants are asked whether they have experienced any of the following five issues in a given month:

- Cancelling services because they can no longer afford it;
- Changing a service to make it more affordable;
- Reducing spending on essential items in order to continue paying for communications services;
- Missing payments;
- Changing payment methods (such as using savings, a credit card, or a repayment plan) in order to continue paying for the service.

Ofcom's latest data shows that 29% of UK households (approximately 8.1 million) had struggled to afford their communications services in April 2023. This is a slight decline on the previous quarter, following a steady increase in affordability issues from a low point of 15% in April 2021 to a peak of 32% in October 2022.<sup>21</sup> The figure includes affordability issues relating to any communications service: broadband, mobile, landline, on-demand streaming, and pay TV.

### 3.1

## Affordability and broadband

The number of households reporting affordability issues with broadband has remained relatively stable during this period (April 2021-October 2022) at between 5-6%.<sup>22</sup> The overall rise in affordability issues was driven by mobile services and in particular by on-demand and pay TV.<sup>23</sup>

However, the latest data from Ofcom's [Communications Affordability Tracker](#) shows an increase in broadband affordability issues. 9% of UK households struggled to afford broadband in April 2023, up from 6% in January 2023. Ofcom noted that the increase was partly explained by households switching

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<sup>21</sup> Ofcom, [Communications Affordability Tracker](#), 5 June 2023

<sup>22</sup> Ofcom, [Communications Affordability Tracker](#), 5 June 2023

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion see House of Commons Library, [Mobile and broadband: affordability and consumer protection](#), November 2022, section 3.3

to cheaper tariffs, which it suggested may “be due to consumers reactions to the recent price rises many have faced” (see Box 3).<sup>24</sup>

### 3 Mid-contract price increases

Most, but not all, internet service providers and mobile providers include terms in their contracts that allow them to raise monthly prices mid-contract (that is, while the customer is within the fixed term of their contract). In recent years, many providers have started linking mid-contract price rises to the rate of inflation. With inflation at a high level, most customers saw prices rise in 2023 by over 14% and some by over 17%.<sup>25</sup>

Where a customer has signed up to a fixed-term contract at a set price, mid-contract price increases would normally be considered a change in terms causing “material detriment” to the customer. Ofcom’s rules state that the provider should give the customer the right to exit the contract without any penalty charges.<sup>26</sup>

However, if the terms of the contract that provide for a mid-term price increase are “sufficiently prominent and transparent” such that the customer can be said to have agreed to the new price, then the price increase will not normally be considered material detriment under the rules.<sup>27</sup>

In February 2023 Ofcom announced a [review into inflation-linked price increases](#):

We are concerned about the degree of uncertainty consumers face about future price rises specified in contracts on the basis of inflation. The unpredictability of inflation rates means it can be difficult to know – months in advance – what an inflation-linked price rise will equate to in pounds and pence when consumers enter a contract. ...

Our review will examine these issues in detail to see whether tougher protections are needed.

The review’s [terms of reference](#) were published in April 2023. Ofcom has said that it will set out its findings and next steps by the end of the year.

Households in different income groups spend similar amounts (in nominal terms) on telecoms services. As a result, lower-income households spend a higher proportion of their income on the service. Ofcom has estimated that, in 2020, the median household spent around 1.2% of its disposable income on broadband. For households in the lowest income decile, average monthly

<sup>24</sup> Ofcom, [Communications Affordability Tracker](#), 5 June 2023

<sup>25</sup> ISPreview, [Jan 2023 Inflation Figures Confirm Huge UK Broadband Price Hikes](#), 18 January 2023

<sup>26</sup> Ofcom, [General Conditions of Entitlement](#), 15 May 2023, C1.14-C1.17

<sup>27</sup> Ofcom, [Guidance on General Condition C1](#), June 2022, 1.100-1.103

spending on broadband represented 4.2% of their disposable income.<sup>28</sup> Separately, Ofcom has estimated that a £27 per month broadband contract would cost an out-of-work Universal Credit claimant 8.3% of their disposable income.<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, affordability issues are more prevalent among disadvantaged demographic groups, including those on means tested benefits (12% struggled to afford broadband in April 2023) and households with an annual income below £10,399 (13%).

According to a survey for Citizens Advice, up to a million people in the UK cut back or stopped spending on broadband in the year to May 2023. 16% of Universal Credit claimants said they were behind on their broadband bills, and 6% of claimants said they had stopped spending on broadband altogether.<sup>30</sup>

## 3.2 Social tariffs

Social tariffs are discounted tariffs for broadband and mobile services that are made available to consumers on low incomes or with special social needs.

There is at present no mandatory requirement for broadband or mobile providers to offer social tariffs. At the time of writing, 24 internet service providers (ISPs), including BT, Virgin Media, and Sky, do so voluntarily. Ofcom maintains a list of [social broadband and mobile packages](#) currently on the market. The available broadband tariffs cost £12-22 per month, which is around half of an equivalent commercial tariff.

Despite the potential savings, take-up of social tariffs is low. As of February 2023, 5.1% of households on Universal Credit were on a broadband or mobile social tariff. ISPs have been criticised for failing to advertise social tariffs and making it difficult to find information about them.<sup>31</sup>

Though take-up is low, Ofcom notes that it has “increased substantially” in the past year: in February 2022, just 1.3% of eligible households were on a social tariff.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ofcom, [Affordability of communications services](#), July 2021, paras 3.28-3.35

<sup>29</sup> Ofcom, [Affordability of Communications Services: Summary of research findings and update on availability and take-up of broadband social tariffs](#), 15 February 2022, paras 4.8-4.18

<sup>30</sup> Citizens Advice, [One million lose broadband access as cost-of-living crisis bites](#), 18 May 2023

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Which?, [Millions could be missing a £250 per year saving on broadband as many providers fail to promote social tariffs](#), 14 June 2022; Ofcom, [Affordability of Communications Services: Summary of research findings and update on availability and take-up of broadband social tariffs](#), 15 February 2022

<sup>32</sup> Ofcom, [Affordability of communications services: April 2023 update](#), 24 April 2023, p11

The Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA) has argued that comparing the number of potentially eligible households with the number of households on social tariffs is a “simplistic” measure of take-up “given the wide range of financial situations that eligible households might find themselves in.”<sup>33</sup>

## A mandatory social tariff?

Ofcom has powers under the Communications Act 2003 to require telecoms providers to offer social tariffs, if directed to do so by the Secretary of State.<sup>34</sup>

In October 2022 the Labour Party called for an industry-wide social tariff. Lucy Powell, Shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, said that a Labour Government would legislate to set one if the industry, Ofcom, and consumer groups could not come to an agreement.<sup>35</sup> Groups including [Citizens Advice](#) and the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute have previously called for a regulated social tariff.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, industry groups have argued that such a policy would be unnecessary, pointing out that there has been a “strong response from the market with virtually all eligible customers in the UK having access to multiple providers with social tariffs.”<sup>37</sup>

Viscount Camrose, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, said in July 2023 that the government had no plans to mandate social tariffs. He noted that social tariffs “are available across 99% of the UK” and that “85% of consumers are able to switch to a social tariff with their existing provider”.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> ISPA, [Response to Ofcom's consultation on proposals to amend the guide to help ensure customers in debt or struggling to pay are treated fairly](#), [accessed 24 November 2022]

<sup>34</sup> Communications Act 2003 s72D

<sup>35</sup> Labour Party, [Labour launches 3 point plan to ease the broadband bombshell and help families and firms facing cost of living crisis made in Downing Street](#), 13 October 2022

<sup>36</sup> Citizens Advice, [Broadband must be made affordable for everyone](#), 21 January 2021; Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, [Response to Ofcom's consultation on proposals to amend the treating vulnerable customers fairly guide](#), [accessed 30 August 2023]

<sup>37</sup> Internet Service Providers Association, [Response to Ofcom's consultation on proposals to amend the treating vulnerable customers fairly guide](#), [accessed 30 August 2023]

<sup>38</sup> [HL9264 – Broadband and mobile phones: social tariffs](#), 31 July 2023

## 4

# Parliamentary material

## Parliamentary Questions

### Mobile Broadband

12 July 2023 | 192986

**Asked by:** Jonathan Ashworth

To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what guidance his Department provides to local authorities on benefit help and advice to claimants who are losing access to the internet as a result of switching off 2G and 3G connections.

**Answering member:** Guy Opperman

**Department:** Department for Work and Pensions

DWP seeks to identify individuals who have complex user needs and/or require additional support to enable them to access our benefits and services, this includes those who do not have internet access.

As part of our commitment to make services accessible to all customers, the Department provides computers for customer use in Jobcentres which have assistive technology and provide a range of peripheral items in each Jobcentre such as alternative keyboards.

We have improved access to our Wi-Fi services in all Jobcentres, allowing customers to use their own personal devices if they prefer, to access internet services, and Staff will signpost people to other community resources (libraries and Citizens Advice) which can also provide advice and internet access points.

If an eligible claimant presents to a Work Coach that connectivity to the internet is causing a barrier to employment then the Work Coach has the discretion to utilise Flexible Support Fund to remove that barrier as they would any other barrier to work. In the case of internet connectivity, they would explore all available options, i.e. social tariffs, dongles, and pre-paid broadband routers and connections available from providers. Whichever is the most suitable then the Work Coach would either sign-post in the case of social tariffs or utilise FSF to pay for other options if appropriate.

Our Jobcentres also provide support and advice about entitlement to benefits and will signpost customers to appropriate information to help them. The Department provides telephone service lines that people can call to make their claims to benefit and to operate their claims.

In addition, customers can access Help to Claim which provides tailored practical support to anyone who needs it. It enables individuals to make a new claim to Universal Credit and is also available to those moving from



legacy benefits because of managed migration, voluntary moves, or a change of circumstances.

Help to Claim support is being delivered independently by Citizens Advice, in partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland, with support provided through telephony and digital channels. Those individuals who are unable to access support via these channels can go to their local jobcentre, where staff will identify the right support to meet their needs.

### Digital Technology: International Cooperation

03 Jul 2023 | 191042

**Asked by:** John Howell

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the debate on Closing the digital divide: promoting equal access to digital technologies at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 23 June 2023.

**Answering member:** Paul Scully

**Department:** Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on states to focus on: access to the internet; improving digital literacy; promoting access to STEM education and careers; and ensuring equality of access to public services. The Government is already making progress on these issues.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is delivering on the Government's commitment to universal access to reliable internet via its social tariffs initiative. To support low-income families, we have worked closely with Ofcom and the industry to bring a range of social tariffs into the market. These low-cost, high-quality broadband and mobile offers are available from a range of providers, across 99% of the UK and start from as low as £10 per month.

The Assembly called on States to '**combat digital illiteracy regardless of gender, age, social status, economic situation, disability or any other personal characteristic**'. The Government remains committed to developing digital skills across the whole of the UK. Through our Digital Entitlement scheme, free Essential Digital Skills Qualifications are available to enable people to gain the skills needed to participate in modern life.

The Assembly also called on States to '**promote equal access to education and careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and careers**'. The Government is funding a new generation of AI talent through scholarships, each worth £10,000, supporting underrepresented groups, including women, to undertake AI and Data Science Conversion Courses. The conversion courses provide a masters

in AI and data science, and allow those from a non-STEM background to learn the skills needed to secure employment in the UK's cutting-edge AI and Data Science sectors.

The Assembly urged States to '**ensure equality of access to public services**'. We are working to ensure that online services are as inclusive as possible by making public sector websites accessible to as many people as possible. Furthermore, assisted digital support services aim to increase digital inclusion for those online users who lack digital confidence, digital skills or access to the internet.

As stated at the Council of Europe, the Government will continue to scrutinise and prioritise digital inclusion. The recent House of Lords inquiry into Digital Inclusion is an example of this oversight, and will ensure the Government continues to prioritise and deliver against this important area.

### Broadband: Rural Areas

19 May 2023 | 184601

**Asked by:** Andrew Rosindell

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps he is taking to (a) promote access to high-speed broadband in rural areas and (b) help ensure that people benefit from digital technologies.

**Answering member:** Sir John Whittingdale

**Department:** Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

In March 2021, the Government launched Project Gigabit, a £5 billion programme to bring lightning-fast, reliable broadband to premises in rural and hard-to-reach locations across the UK. We have already made over £1.4 billion of funding available to broadband suppliers to build gigabit-capable infrastructure to premises that will not be reached by suppliers' commercial plans alone.

The Government is also working to ensure that very hard to reach premises that may be unable to access a gigabit-capable connection also see an improvement in their connectivity. In April, the Government announced an £8 million fund to provide capital grants to further promote new satellite connectivity to up to the most remote 35,000 premises, helping these premises get improved broadband where required. Further details on the value of the grants, who will be able to apply for the scheme, and how to apply, will be released in due course.

One of the Government's priorities is to ensure that no one is left behind in the digital age. This includes people who do not have the access, skills, or motivation to use the internet. The UK's Digital Strategy published in 2022 is clear that HM Government has a "vision to enable everyone, from every

industry and across the UK, to benefit from all that digital innovation can offer.”

To ensure that all people can benefit from digital technologies, we are working with providers to make access affordable for those who need it. We have worked with the industry to ensure there is a range of high-quality, low cost social tariffs for households in receipt of Universal Credit and other means tested benefits from as little as £10 per month. These are available in 99% of the UK. In addition in June 2022, leaders from broadband and mobile operators agreed on a set of industry [commitments](#) to help people through the global rise in the cost of living.

Training is also available for adults wishing to acquire digital skills. To put essential digital skills for adults on an equal footing alongside English and Maths, as a third basic skill, the Department for Education introduced a new legal entitlement to study free high-quality Essential Digital Skills Qualifications (EDSQ); and from August 2023, new digital Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQ), at Entry Level 3 and Level 1. We also support the provision of essential digital skills training in community settings through the Adult Education Budget.

### [Science and Technology Sector: International Competitiveness](#)

03 May 2023 | 732 c102

**Asked by:** Stephanie Peacock

Broadband access is essential to UK competitiveness, yet Ofcom has revealed that just 220,000 of the 8 million households struggling to pay their internet bill have signed up to a discounted broadband package. When will the Government match Labour’s commitment to ensure that there is an industry-wide, mandatory and well-advertised social tariff for low-income families?

**Answered by:** Paul Scully

**Department:** Science, Innovation and Technology

There has been a fourfold increase in people taking up social tariffs, but we know we have to do more to help people with the cost of living. That is why we lent in to the carriers in the first place and encouraged the introduction of social tariffs, but we will do more. We will work with the carriers to make sure that those tariffs get advertised well, so we can get better take-up.

### [Broadband: Employment and Social Security Benefits](#)

07 Mar 2023 | 155193

**Asked by:** Wera Hobhouse

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, if she will hold discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of increasing capital investment to ensure full broadband access to allow people to apply for (a) benefits and (b) jobs.

**Answering member:** Paul Scully

**Department:** Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

My department engages with colleagues across Government, including Cabinet Office, to discuss matters relating to how we improve connectivity for the whole of the UK.

Over 74% of UK premises can now access gigabit-capable broadband, up from 6% in January 2019. The competitive and pro-growth regulatory environment we have created has given investors the confidence to provide billions of pounds of investment to enable broadband suppliers to expand their networks across the UK. But we recognise that some parts of the country will not attract commercial investment and therefore we already have substantial capital investment programmes in place. Our £1 billion superfast programme has extended superfast broadband of at least 30 Mbps to over 97% of UK premises, and we are making excellent progress with Project Gigabit, the government's £5 billion mission to deliver even faster, and more reliable broadband to rural and hard to reach parts of the UK.

My department has negotiated a range of high-quality, low-cost fixed broadband and mobile social tariffs for households in receipt of Universal Credit and other means tested benefits for as little as £10 per month. These offers are available in 99% of the UK.

Support is also available for those seeking employment. Jobcentre Plus work coaches can provide free broadband connections for 6 months to eligible claimants who are not online. This is administered by the DWP's Flexible Support Fund.

### [Broadband: Rural Areas](#)

06 Mar 2023 | 153755

**Asked by:** Jim Shannon

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what recent steps she has taken to help ensure full and equal access to superfast broadband, particularly in rural areas.

**Answering member:** Paul Scully

**Department:** Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The Government is committed to delivering nationwide gigabit connectivity as soon as possible. Across the UK, 97.5% of premises can access a superfast connection ( $\geq 30$ Mbps).

We have introduced measures in the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022 to specifically assist suppliers providing broadband services, such as an increased ability to upgrade and share the existing duct and pole network, and procedures to deal with non-responsive landowners. This follows the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Act 2021, which makes it easier for broadband operators to install in multiple dwelling units where the landlord is repeatedly unresponsive to requests for access.

To support those on low-incomes to stay connected, the Government has worked closely with suppliers to ensure the provision of low-cost, high-quality fixed social tariffs in the market. These offers are available in 99% of the UK, and many provide superfast connections. Social tariffs are available to those claiming Universal Credit and other means-tested benefits, starting from £12pm.

We are also investing £5 billion as part of Project Gigabit to deliver gigabit-capable (1000Mbps) broadband to hard-to-reach areas of the UK. Gigabit-capable coverage currently stands at 74.2% and over £1 billion of public subsidy has already been made available to broadband suppliers to extend gigabit-capable broadband further, to some of the hardest to reach parts of the country.

Support is also available for homes and businesses in rural areas through the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme. The voucher scheme provides a subsidy of up to £4,500 for residents and businesses towards the cost of installing gigabit-capable broadband via local community broadband projects.

### [Broadband: Prices](#)

09 Feb 2023 | 141465

**Asked by:** Darren Jones

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential impact of increases in the price of broadband packages on the ability of people to access essential online services.

**Answering member:** Paul Scully

**Department:** Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

We recognise that this is clearly a difficult time for families up and down the country who are struggling to pay their bills as a result of the global rise in the cost of living.

On 23 January, the former Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport met with Chief Executives from major broadband providers at which she asked them to consider carefully the need, at this time, for above inflation price increases and highlighted the impact they may have on those already struggling to pay their bills.

My department has also negotiated a range of high-quality, low-cost broadband social tariffs for households in receipt of Universal Credit and other means tested benefits from as little as £12 per month. These are available in 99% of the UK and may represent a 50% saving from the average-priced broadband package.

Ofcom, the independent regulator, has a statutory duty to assess the affordability in the telecoms market. My department engages regularly with them on matters relating to the affordability of broadband and other telecoms services.

We encourage anyone who is struggling to afford their broadband service to contact their supplier and see what support is available.

### [Social Tariffs: Broadband](#)

03 Nov 2022 | 72309

**Asked by:** Alberto Costa

To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what steps his Department is taking to assist people in receipt of benefits by expanding access to social tariffs offered by telecommunication companies.

**Answering member:** Guy Opperman

**Department:** Department for Work and Pensions

DWP is working with DCMS to encourage Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to expand eligibility for broadband social tariffs to all claimants in receipt of Universal Credit and other means-tested benefits.

We have developed an Application Programme Interface (API) service, which allows ISPs to verify, with the customers' permission, if they are in receipt of an eligible benefit for the broadband social tariffs.

DWP is working with Ofcom to raise awareness of this important Help for Households initiative amongst claimants and staff in Jobcentres, Universal Credit Service Centres, and Pensions Centres.

### Debates

#### [Internet Access \(Children Eligible for Free School Meals\)](#)

01 Nov 2022 | House of Commons | 721 cc815-9

Ten minute rule motion for leave to bring in a Bill. Agreed to on question.  
Presentation and first reading

### **Statements**

#### [Digital Infrastructure Update](#)

18 Apr 2023 | HCWS720

**Member:** Julia Lopez

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# Press material

### Articles

[Digital exclusion is leaving coastal communities behind](#)

The New Statesman

18 August 2023

[The Guardian view on the digital divide: a growing problem that must be taken seriously](#)

The Guardian

6 August 2023

[Head of £5bn rural broadband upgrade exits as rollout falters](#) [subscription only]

The Telegraph

29 July 2023

[Lochaber rural broadband pioneer taken over by new business](#)

The Press and Journal

24 July 2023

[UK broadband and mobile firms accused of burying cheaper deals](#)

The Guardian

10 July 2023

[‘More than half of UK broadband customers’ hit by connection problems](#)

The Guardian

4 July 2023

[Isles broadband falls even further behind](#)

Stornoway Gazette

30 June 2023

[Millions in UK are being left behind as world moves online, say peers](#)

The Guardian

29 June 2023

[R100 superfast broadband: 53,000+ homes in north still waiting](#)

The Press and Journal

29 June 2023

[Interactive map reveals areas with the most sluggish internet speeds are - how bad is your area?](#)

Daily Mail

10 June 2023



[NFU survey shows more work is needed to improve rural connectivity](#)

NFU Online  
24 May 2023

[One million cancel broadband as living costs rise](#)

BBC News  
17 May 2023

[Most deprived areas being left in broadband slow lane, says LGA](#)

The Independent  
12 May 2023

[Millions missing out on broadband social tariffs in UK, says Ofcom](#)

The Guardian  
24 April 2023

[Worst 50 areas in the UK for broadband speed REVEALED - did your town make the list?](#)

Daily Mail  
8 February 2023

[Faster internet connections reaching more homes than ever, Ofcom says](#)

The Independent  
15 December 2023

[Islanders slam slow R100 roll-out amid 'connectivity crisis'](#) [subscription only]

The Oban Times  
12 December 2022

[Orkney and Shetland amongst four Scots areas with 'worst internet connections in the UK'](#)

The Herald  
3 August 2022

**Press releases**

[Cheaper broadband for struggling families: 14 August 2022](#)

Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, The Rt Hon Nadine Dorries MP, and The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP  
15 August 2022

[Boost for broadband and 5G coverage revolution rollout as government explores plan to open £160 million satellites fund](#)

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, UK Space Agency, and The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP

1 August 2023

[Bold plans to boost digital connectivity across the country, from wifi in lamp posts and satellites in most rural parts of Scotland](#)

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Department for Transport, and The Rt Hon Sir John Whittingdale OBE MP

12 June 2023

[Digital divide: Poorer households left behind in broadband race during cost of living crisis](#)

Local Government Association

11 May 2023

[Publication of Wireless Infrastructure Strategy and Spectrum Statement: DSIT Secretary of State letter to Ofcom](#)

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

13 April 2023

[Millions of homeowners and tenants to get better access to faster broadband](#)

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Julia Lopez MP

6 January 2023

[Broadband beamed from space to isolated areas under plans to boost countryside internet connections](#)

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Building Digital UK, and The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP

30 November 2022

[Mobile and broadband firms meet with ministers to look at further support to help people facing cost of living difficulties](#)

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Julia Lopez MP

29 November 2022

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