

Debate Pack  
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# Debate on provision of broadband for rural communities

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A Westminster Hall debate on provision of broadband for rural communities has been scheduled for 2.30pm on 13 December 2023. The debate will be opened by Chris Loder MP.

More detail on the issues discussed in this debate pack can be found the Library briefings, [Gigabit broadband in the UK: Government targets, policy, and funding](#) (July 2023) and [Building broadband and mobile infrastructure](#) (December 2022).

# 1 Background

## 1.1 Broadband technologies

Gigabit-capable broadband is the next generation of high-speed broadband. It means any technology that can deliver speeds of at least 1 gigabit per second (Gbps). 1 Gbps is equal to 1,000 megabits per second (Mbps). A download speed of 1 Gbps would allow a high-definition film to be downloaded in under one minute.

Technologies that can deliver gigabit-capable broadband include:

- Fibre to the Premises (FTTP), where fibre optic cables run directly to each premises. It is also called 'full fibre' to differentiate it from fibre to the cabinet (FTTC) technology, where a fibre cable goes to the street cabinet and copper wires connect individual premises.
- High-speed cable broadband (DOCSIS 3.1), delivered by Virgin Media O2.
- Fixed wireless 5G networks (mainly used for remote areas where installing cables is prohibitively expensive).

## 1.2 Benefits of better broadband access

The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee report, [Digital exclusion \(June 2023\)](#), 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>1</sup>

Respondents to an inquiry into rural productivity by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) 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.”<sup>2</sup> The Internet Service Providers Association told the APPG that that digital infrastructure could reverse the “brain drain” from rural to urban areas by making it easier to set up and run a business.

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>3</sup>

A report commissioned by government found that its £780 million investment in superfast broadband in mainly rural areas 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>

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<sup>1</sup> House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Digital exclusion](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, Ch 3

<sup>2</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>3</sup> Countryside Alliance, [Written evidence to the DCMS Select Committee, Broadband and the road to 5G](#), April 2020

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

## 2 Broadband coverage

### 2.1 Targets

The government's target is for 85% of UK premises to have access to gigabit broadband (download speeds of at least 1 gigabit per second/1 Gbps) by 2025, and 99%+ by 2030.<sup>5</sup> This target is less than the Conservative Party's 2019 manifesto commitment, which pledged to deliver nationwide gigabit-broadband by 2025.<sup>6</sup>

The 2025 target was based on the expectation that commercial investment alone would reach 80% of premises. This is still the government's expectation, so the delay to 2030 primarily affects the 20% of premises that will require public subsidies to get gigabit broadband. It was consequently described by rural stakeholders as a "kick in the teeth" for rural communities.<sup>7</sup>

The National Infrastructure Commission's [Infrastructure Progress Review 2023](#) concluded that the government's targets are likely to be met.<sup>8</sup> Ofcom, the UK communications regulator anticipates that if broadband operators realise their planned network deployments over the next three years, then 90% of residential premises will have access to gigabit broadband by May 2026.<sup>9</sup>

### 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](#).

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<sup>5</sup> DLUHC, [Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), 2 February 2022; [PQ 116941 - Broadband](#), 7 February 2022

<sup>6</sup> [Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019](#), December 2019

<sup>7</sup> BBC News, [Gigabit broadband: Watered-down plans a 'kick in the teeth'](#), 26 November 2020

<sup>8</sup> NIC, [Infrastructure Progress Review 2023](#), 27 March 2023, p22

<sup>9</sup> Ofcom, [Connected Nations: supplementary report on Planned Network Deployments 2023](#), 17 October 2023, p14

Broadband connectivity in the UK, May 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%	47%	86%	73%
East of England	95%	99%	97%	46%	83%	70%
London	-	-	97%	-	-	84%
North East	93%	98%	97%	46%	82%	73%
North West	92%	98%	97%	48%	79%	74%
South East	93%	99%	97%	52%	80%	72%
South West	89%	97%	94%	42%	80%	66%
West Midlands	91%	98%	97%	46%	86%	79%
Yorkshire & Humber	94%	98%	97%	51%	85%	76%
Scotland	78%	98%	95%	27%	77%	68%
Wales	92%	98%	95%	39%	75%	59%
Northern Ireland	91%	99%	96%	79%	95%	90%
<b>UK</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>98%</b>	<b>97%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>74%</b>

Calculated using rural/urban classification of output areas.

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

The table above shows connectivity data for the nine English regions, plus Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, for May 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.

## Fast and slow broadband connections in the UK, summer 2022

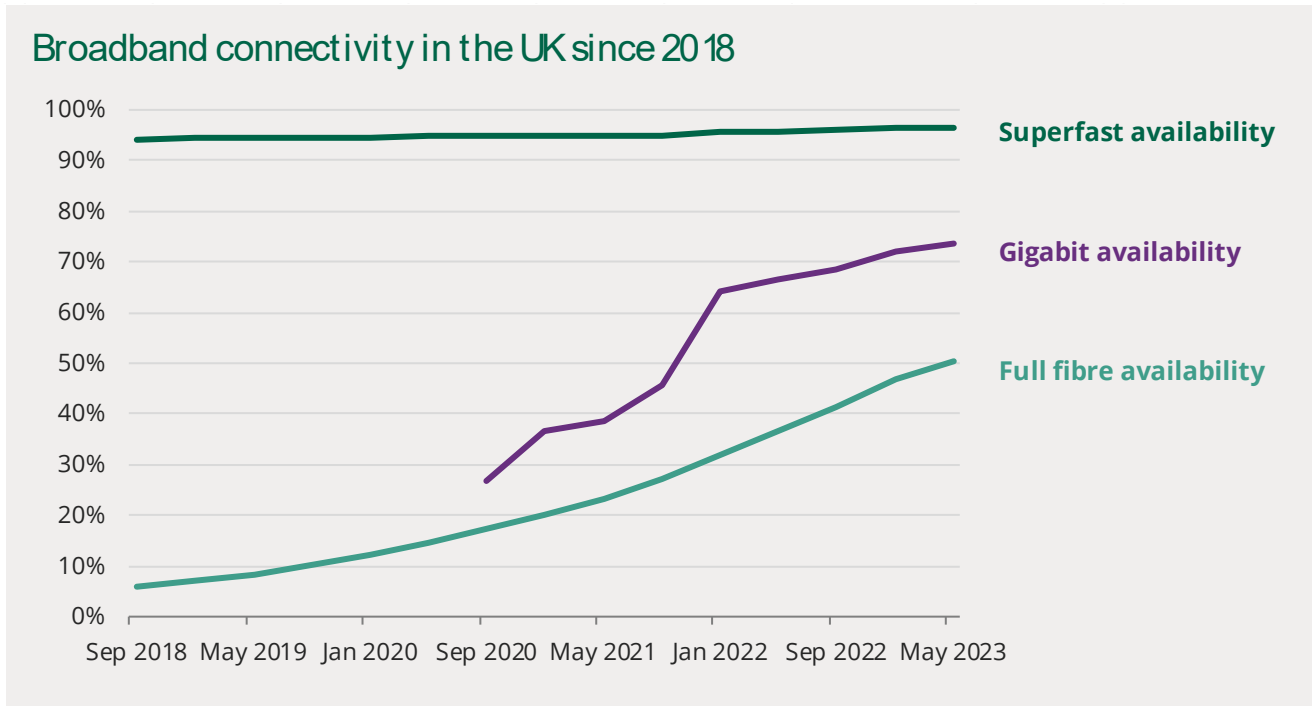
Country or region	Percentage of lines receiving speeds under 10 Mbps			Percentage of lines receiving speeds over 30 Mbps		
	Rural areas	Urban areas	Total	Rural areas	Urban areas	Total
East Midlands	5%	4%	4%	80%	86%	84%
East of England	6%	3%	4%	78%	87%	84%
London	-	-	4%	-	-	85%
North East	6%	5%	5%	78%	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 table above 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.

According to Ofcom's analysis of planned network deployments, 98% of urban households in the UK will have access to gigabit broadband in March 2026, compared to 75% of rural properties.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ofcom, [Connected Nations: supplementary report on Planned Network Deployments 2023](#), 17 October 2023, p12



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

The chart above 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 shown before that date. Data is available 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: Virgin Media O2’s gigabit-capable network uses cable technology. Gigabit broadband availability saw a large jump in late 2021, corresponding with [Virgin Media O2’s upgrade to its network](#).

Superfast broadband availability has increased from 94.0% to 96.6% since September 2018.

## 3 Support for broadband

### 3.1 Project Gigabit

The government has promised £5 billion to subsidise the roll-out of fixed gigabit-broadband networks 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. At least a quarter of these (1.56 million premises, 5% of the total), will need to be reached by 2025 to meet the government’s 85% coverage target.<sup>11</sup>

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 per premises 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’).

Contracts and vouchers target similar types of premises. To avoid duplicating public investment, BDUK may pause voucher applications in areas that are going through a Project Gigabit procurement. There have been reports of planned voucher-funded projects stalling because premises were added to a procurement, making them ineligible for a voucher.<sup>12</sup>

### Project Gigabit and the devolved administrations

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](#)

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<sup>11</sup> BDUK,

<sup>12</sup> See for example ISPreview, [MP Tim Farron Calls on Gov to Probe U-Turn on B4RN’s Cumbria FTTP Build](#), 20 June 2023



[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](#). Project Stratum is largely funded through financial support received under the 2017 [Confidence and Supply Agreement between the DUP and the UK Government](#).

## Progress

BDUK publishes [quarterly updates on the progress of Project Gigabit](#).

To date, fifteen [Project Gigabit contracts](#) have been awarded. They cover just under 400,000 premises (all in England) and have a total value of around £635 million. Annex 1 to the September 2023 Project Gigabit update provides indicative timescales for other procurements.

As of September 2023, 122,300 gigabit vouchers had been issued.

BDUK said in its Annual Performance Report 2022 to 2023 that as of March 2023, 929,700 premises had been reached due to BDUK 'interventions'.<sup>13</sup> This is ahead of its target trajectory for reaching 1.56 million premises by the end of 2025. The figure includes premises reached through Project Gigabit contracts, voucher schemes, and pre-existing schemes now delivering gigabit connections.

## 3.2

## The Universal Service Obligation

The [Universal Service Obligation](#) (USO) for broadband 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. Further information on the scheme can be found in the Library briefing, [The Universal Service Obligation \(USO\) for Broadband \(March 2022\)](#).

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 are ineligible because they either have access to mobile broadband offering equivalent speeds or are included in a government-funded broadband rollout.<sup>14</sup>

The Lords Communications and Digital Committee heard from stakeholders that 10Mbps no longer constitutes decent broadband. The

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<sup>13</sup> BDUK, [Building Digital UK annual report and accounts 2022 to 2023](#), 21 November 2023

<sup>14</sup> [HL6618 – Broadband: Standards](#), 24 March 2023

Rural Services Network, for example, argued that the USO should be upgraded to 25-30Mbps.<sup>15</sup>

The government published a consultation in October 2023 which sought [views on changes to the USO](#), including whether the 10 Mbps minimum speed remains appropriate. A response has not yet been published.

### 3.3 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 response to a parliamentary question in April 2021, the Government stated that “less than 0.3% of the country or less than 100,000 premises” are likely to be in such very hard to reach areas.<sup>16</sup>

The government has consulted on technological options to reach very hard to reach premises:

- Fixed wireless access (FWA), where an internet signal is sent from a mast providing 4G/5G mobile broadband.
- Satellite broadband, where a signal is sent from satellites in low-Earth orbit (LEO) or geo-stationary orbit (GEO).
- High-altitude platforms, where signal is sent from an unmanned airborne vehicle or device high in the Earth’s atmosphere.<sup>17</sup>

The feasibility of these technologies is considered in detail in a 2021 report by the consultancy Analysys Mason.<sup>18</sup> Only FWA (with direct line of sight) was judged to be capable of delivering gigabit speeds. However, some organisations, including the National Farmers’ Union and the Agricultural Productivity Taskforce, responded to the government’s call for evidence that delivering ‘good-to-average’ speeds in the short term should be the first priority, rather than gigabit-capable broadband.<sup>19</sup>

In a written statement in April 2023, the government said that it will “bring forward additional policy measures later this year” to help very hard to reach premises get faster internet using wireless technologies. It said that this would include an £8 million fund to help the most remote

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<sup>15</sup> House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, [Digital exclusion](#), HL Paper 219, 29 June 2023, paras 123-126

<sup>16</sup> [PQ 180575 – Broadband](#), 19 April 2021

<sup>17</sup> DCMS, [Improving broadband for Very Hard to Reach premises](#), 19 March 2021

<sup>18</sup> Analysys Mason, [Research on Very Hard to Reach Premises: technical and commercial analysis – report for the Broadband Stakeholder Group](#), August 2021

<sup>19</sup> DCMS, [Improving broadband for Very Hard to Reach Premises: government response](#), 8 February 2022, section 9

premises (around 35,000) purchase satellite broadband.<sup>20</sup> BDUK said in September 2023 that the government's intention was for the scheme to "start taking applications for these grants from Autumn 2023".<sup>21</sup> The scheme is not yet open.

The government published a consultation on policy options for very hard to reach premises in October 2023. The consultation document did not include specific policy proposals but rather set out broad options for support:

- Amending existing funding schemes (such as broadband vouchers) so that they incorporate very hard to reach premises.
- Creating new schemes that specifically target very hard to reach premises.
- Using regulatory/legislative changes to encourage market-led deployment.<sup>22</sup>

The consultation closed on 27 November. The government has not yet responded.

## 3.4 Policies to support private 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.

To help achieve this, the government and Ofcom have introduced a series of policy reforms intended to make it easier to build broadband networks. 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 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

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<sup>20</sup> [HCWS720](#), 18 April 2023

<sup>21</sup> BDUK, [Project Gigabit progress update: September 2023](#), 20 September 2023

<sup>22</sup> DSIT, [Improving broadband for Very Hard to Reach premises](#), 2 October 2023

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.
- Creating a regulatory framework that encourages new entrants (called alternative network operators, or ‘altnets’) to compete with incumbents Openreach (part of BT) and Virgin Media. 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).<sup>23</sup>

## Network ‘overbuild’

One consequence of the large number of altnets 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 (FT) 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>24</sup>

Some commentators have noted 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.

Conversely, others have argued that overbuild is preferable to underbuild. Ian Morris, of telecoms news website Light Reading, noted that until recently the “dearth of infrastructure competition gave Openreach no market incentive to invest in full-fiber networks”.<sup>25</sup>

The Labour Party’s shadow minister for creative industries and digital, Chris Bryant, told an industry conference in November 2023 that while “competition is good for growing and enabling innovation and development”, he did not agree that overbuilding was the only way to ensure competition. He suggested that Ofcom could “do a bit more in this space around cooperation”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For more on these reforms see House of Commons Library, [Gigabit broadband in the UK: Government targets, policy, and funding](#), July 2023, section 3; and [Building broadband and mobile infrastructure](#), December 2022

<sup>24</sup> FT, [Broadband market inequalities test Westminster’s hopes of levelling up](#), 19 June 2022

<sup>25</sup> Light Reading, [Despite critics, fiber rollout is a rare UK success story](#), 20 June 2022

<sup>26</sup> Telco Titans, [Labour veers away from UK broadband nationalisation as Project Gigabit plods on](#), 28 November 2023

The Government's view remains that it "welcomes" Ofcom's approach of encouraging "competitive build in the majority of the UK".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> [PQ 106697 – Broadband: Optical Fibres](#), 21 January 2022

## 4 Parliamentary material

### 4.1 Debate

Westminster Hall debate: [Access to Broadband Services](#)

HC Deb 6 September 2023 | Vol 737 c156WH

### 4.2 PQs

#### [Mobile Broadband](#)

Asked by: Bryant, Sir Chris

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what comparative assessment she has made of how the UK compares to other European nations on its proportion of (a) 4G and (b) 5G coverage.

Answering member: Sir John Whittingdale | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Coverage methodologies and metrics vary across countries, so it is difficult to make like for like comparisons.

For ease of comparison, we have used premises coverage for 4G, which is available outside 99.9% of UK premises. However, the Shared Rural Network programme will help extend coverage to 95% of the UK landmass. According to the most recent data from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the UK compares favourably with population coverage across Europe, and slightly ahead of comparator countries including France at 99%, Spain at 99.6% and Germany at 99.8%.

Basic, non-standalone 5G is available outside 85% of UK premises. According to data from the EU Observatory, the UK's 5G rollout progress is above the EU average which stands at 81% population coverage. However, the UK falls slightly behind the average of comparator countries' non-standalone 5G progress with Italy at 99%, Germany at 93% and France at 88%.

The Wireless Infrastructure Strategy, published earlier this year, announced the Government's vision for wireless connectivity and shared a new ambition for nationwide coverage of higher quality, standalone 5G in all populated areas by 2030.

HC Deb 21 November 2023 | PQ 2284

### Broadband: Rural Areas

Asked by: Day, Martyn

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, with reference to the Answer of 26 October 2023 to Question 204064 on Broadband: Rural Areas, whether her Department plans to provide support to people who are ineligible for the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme because they are in plan to have superfast broadband installed but do not have a timescale for this process.

Answering member: Sir John Whittingdale | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Eligibility for the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme is dependent on premises meeting the relevant criteria, such as not being included in any suppliers' commercial rollout plans for a gigabit-capable connection, nor in any other government-funded contract - planned or in place - to improve the network.

Eligibility for the voucher scheme is also dependent on the premises' rurality status and only being able to access speeds less than 100Mbps. Therefore, commercial plans to provide superfast speeds ( $\geq 30$ Mbps) would not result in ineligibility for the scheme, assuming the premises met the wider requirements.

Although premises that are included in suppliers' plans to receive a *gigabit-capable* connection are ineligible for vouchers, we still keep commercial plans under review. If these plans change, we will explore whether the premises can be connected through Project Gigabit.

HC Deb 15 November 2023 | PQ 318

### Mobile Phones: Rural Areas

Asked by: Hudson, Dr Neil

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps her Department is taking to help ensure mobile phone coverage in rural communities.

Answering member: Sir John Whittingdale | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The Government is committed to improve digital connectivity in rural areas. Project Gigabit is the Government's £5 billion programme to deliver gigabit-capable broadband to rural and hard-to-reach communities across the UK. Alongside suppliers' commercial rollout plans, our target is to achieve 85% gigabit coverage of the UK by 2025, and then nationwide coverage by 2030. Over 78% of UK premises can

now access gigabit-capable broadband, which represents significant progress since January 2019, when coverage was just 6%.

Through our 12 Project Gigabit contracts, including one in Cumbria, and 27 current live procurements, we have made over £2 billion of funding available to suppliers to bring gigabit-capable broadband to up to 1.1 million premises in hard to reach parts of the country.

Support is also available for homes and businesses in some rural areas through the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme. Over 100,00 vouchers have been used to connect rural homes and businesses with fast, reliable broadband.

In April 2023, the Government announced a capital grants scheme to provide up to 35,000 premises with help to access Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite equipment to improve their connectivity. The scheme will be open to premises that the department has identified as being unlikely to benefit from an improved fixed line, or fixed wireless access connection. More information on eligibility for this scheme will be announced shortly.

The department is also consulting on future policy solutions for Very Hard to Reach premises. In October 2023, we launched two consultations, one on the Broadband Universal Service Obligation and one setting out our proposed policy approach to connecting Very Hard to Reach premises across the UK. We welcome contributions to both consultations until they close on Monday 27 November.

To improve mobile coverage in rural areas, the Government is working with the UK's four mobile network operators to deliver the Shared Rural Network. This agreement will see the Government and industry jointly invest over £1 billion to increase outdoor 4G mobile coverage across the UK to 95% by the end of 2025. The programme targets areas of the country with partial or no 4G coverage, in rural and hard-to-reach locations across the UK. 4G coverage across the UK is currently approaching 93%, which is up from 91% when the Shared Rural Network deal was signed in March 2020.

Alongside the Shared Rural Network, the Government's Wireless Infrastructure Strategy, published in April 2023, set out further steps to improve connectivity across the UK, including a new ambition for nationwide coverage of standalone 5G in all populated areas by 2030.

Finally, Simon Fell MP has been appointed as the Government's Rural Connectivity Champion. His role will be to ensure that rural communities and businesses can access and adopt the connectivity that they need.

HC Deb 26 October 2023 | PQ 204065

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



Asked by: Lord Empey

To ask His Majesty's Government whether there is a delay in issuing vouchers in Northern Ireland under the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme for rural broadband connectivity.

Answering member: Viscount Camrose | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

As part of Project Gigabit, we are planning to launch procurements in Northern Ireland, to bring gigabit-capable broadband to premises that will not be reached by suppliers' commercial plans.

Work is under way to identify the premises requiring support, and a temporary pause to the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme for projects in Northern Ireland was initiated to enable the intervention area to be defined.

Building Digital UK (BDUK) is working closely with all active suppliers registered on the voucher scheme to identify areas where a voucher-funded project has a good likelihood of delivering gigabit coverage faster than the procurement route and represents good value for money. These areas are designated as voucher priority areas, meaning that suppliers are able to continue to build voucher-funded projects in these areas throughout procurement.

HL Deb 27 September 2023 | PQ HL10227

### Broadband: Rural Areas

Asked by: Hudson, Dr Neil

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential impact of the retirement of the public switched telephone network on the broadband connectivity of rural communities.

Answering member: Sir John Whittingdale | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The retirement of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) will not have any impact on broadband connectivity. The replacement Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services only require a very basic internet connection to function correctly. As a result, rural communities with limited digital connectivity can be upgraded to digital telephony services. For additional information, I would like to refer the Hon. Member to the answer Minister Julia Lopez gave to Question 135333 on 7 February 2023.

HC Deb 18 September 2023 | PQ 199512

### Broadband

Asked by: Smith, Alyn

To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what support her Department has provided to businesses to support the rollout of improved broadband services in (a) urban, (b) rural and (c) semi-urban areas.

Answering member: Stuart Andrew | Department: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Currently, 97.6% premises across the UK have access to a superfast connection ( $\geq 30$  Mbps) and 76.4% have gigabit-capable coverage. In Scotland, these figures are 95.7% and 70.2% for superfast and gigabit-capable respectively. Through Project Gigabit the Government aims to reach at least 85% gigabit-capable coverage across the UK by 2025 and then to reach near-universal coverage as soon as possible.

For urban areas, a key part of the Government's approach is to promote increased competition in broadband delivery. We have made it as easy and attractive as possible for firms to build their networks in the UK, and we now have a thriving market of over 80 providers investing nearly £35bn rolling out gigabit broadband all over the UK.

To support coverage in rural areas, 31 local and regional procurements have now been launched within England, with 12 of these now in the contract delivery stage.

Within Scotland, the Scottish Government undertook a Public Review during March and April 2023 to seek responses from broadband suppliers and other interested parties on current and planned commercial coverage of gigabit broadband. The Scottish Government has also undertaken initial market engagement with suppliers on their potential interest in Project Gigabit contracts in Scotland, prior to procurements commencing later this year.

The Scottish Government's Reaching 100% (R100) project is also providing gigabit broadband coverage to 115,000 premises that do not have access to superfast broadband, with £49.5 million funding from the UK government. This project has covered over 24,000 premises to date.

Premises in Scotland can also benefit from support through the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, which provides up to £4,500 towards the cost of installing gigabit-capable infrastructure for homes and businesses, while remaining sub-superfast premises are also eligible for support from the Scottish Government's Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme.

HC Deb 12 July 2023 | PQ 192666

## 5

# News items and press releases

Rural Services Network

20 November 2023

[Is the roll out of superfast rural broadband too complicated for users?](#)

Farmers' Weekly

3 October 2023

[Improved broadband access coming to 100,000 rural homes](#)

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs press release

2 October 2023

[Action to support rural communities announced](#)

Computer Weekly

2 August 2023

[Improved rural connectivity could add £65bn to UK economy](#)

Rural Services Network

10 July 2023

[Project Gigabit slow in making progress in rural areas](#)

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology press release

12 June 2023

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

Times [subscription]

3 June 2023

[Rural Scotland and islands held back by worst broadband in UK](#)

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