

SUMMARY NOTE FROM PRIVATE ROUNDTABLE ON DIGITAL AND FIXED LINK CONNECTIVITY

On Wednesday 12 November, the Scottish Affairs Committee hosted a private roundtable with Members of Parliament as part of its two connectivity inquiries:

- [Connectivity in Scotland: Digital Connectivity](#)
- [Connectivity in Scotland: Fixed Links](#)

Members representing constituencies particularly affected by poor digital connectivity were invited to share the challenges facing their constituents and suggest areas for further scrutiny by the Committee. The Committee also spoke to Members regarding its inquiry into fixed links.

Digital connectivity

The following areas were discussed in relation to digital connectivity.

- Overall, some Members felt there was a cultural perception that rural communities do not ‘deserve’ high-quality broadband, that those from rural and remote communities should ‘expect’ issues, and that small, rural populations are felt to be simply ‘too difficult’ to connect.
- Many households and rural communities remain unconnected despite programmes from both the UK and Scottish Governments.
- It was noted that cottage industries and micro-businesses were particularly impacted by poor digital connectivity, as well as individuals who use certain medical systems. Poor connectivity also affects banking. For example, authentication codes can fail in mobile blackspots.
- Regarding other knock-on impacts as a result of bad digital connectivity, it was noted that the RTS switch off was difficult for people who are on complex tariffs. It was also noted that if TV moved entirely online, rural communities could lose out on TV services. Similarly, it was also noted that those in rural communities often cannot instal ‘smart meters’ due to poor signal. Members also expressed that the phasing out of legacy systems such as terrestrial TV and RTS, means operators of those systems are not investing in improving coverage or connectivity.
- There are also secondary issues affecting connectivity. For example, metal framed houses can interfere with connectivity.

- A lack of reliable broadband has meant greater adoption of alternative solutions like Starlink. While Starlink has gained popularity, Members commented that there are questions around affordability, latency rates and national security risks.
- Mobile coverage is patchy, particularly following the shutdown of 2G and 3G networks by some providers. It was also noted that this poor connectivity is not exclusively an issue in rural areas alone; numerous examples of poor connectivity were raised within a few miles of Scotland's cities.
- Storm damage and network outages expose inadequate backup systems. For example, battery packs supplied by some telecom's providers are costly and can sometimes only last a few hours. As a result, communities can be without connectivity for days and sometimes weeks at a time. This can also impact certain medical systems, thereby exacerbating health inequalities. There is no statutory requirement for providing longer back-ups.
- Emergency services are also impacted by connectivity failures. Better digital connectivity could better aid emergency services. For example, mountain rescue could utilise 'what3words.'
- It was commented that telecoms providers often do not have incentives to connect homes in a timely way even when cabinets have already been installed nearby. There is often a monopoly supplier in remote areas, which can mean higher costs and a lack of incentive to connect houses to the cabinet.¹
- Smaller providers often find it difficult to compete due to high upfront costs. While there are some examples of community-led initiatives of installing broadband services, standards to do this are high and may be difficult to replicate by other communities on a large scale. In addition, companies who want to use existing infrastructure (such as ducts and poles) must rent access with Openreach. It was commented that companies were required to pay for access to both ducts and poles even if both were not required, adding extra costs to smaller companies and hampering competition. These costs were compared to "train operators paying canal owners for rail lines." Members suggested that rule changes by Ofcom could improve viability for smaller providers.

¹ A broadband cabinet is a structure located locally that houses the equipment to deliver broadband to an area. The cabinet is connected to the main telecom network. Individual properties need to be connected to this cabinet through cables in order to access broadband services.



- Members expressed that Openreach are failing in their responsibility to connect rural communities (including through an overly bureaucratic and complex interface with communities), while competitors – such as GoFibre are specifically targeting those areas and delivering strong results. Members proposed this could reflect a strong case for breaking Openreach's monopoly.
- In relation to the Project Gigabit and R100 schemes, it was noted that even with these voucher schemes, some projects remain economically unviable and there are large shortfalls. Members also highlighted that UK and Scottish Government's connectivity initiatives are not necessarily aligned with each other, which can cause confusion for consumers.
- The Project Gigabit scheme is not geared toward smaller companies and community projects. For example, one community broadband project which self-installed fibre optic cables faced complexity when engaging with the scheme. It also found that due to the sequencing of events of the schemes, vouchers could not be claimed retrospectively.
- On the Scottish Government's R100 scheme, some Members were concerned that the scheme risked discouraging commercial investment. They also found examples R100 targeting the 'low hanging fruit' so only partial rollout happened in areas.
- Members discussed the current regulatory framework and highlighted concerns about the Government's target to deliver gigabit broadband to 85% of the UK by 2025. They noted that this target incentivises providers to prioritise easily accessible areas to meet deadlines, leaving the most challenging areas until last.
- Members also said that Ofcom must take their responsibilities to rural and remote communities more seriously, as there is currently an erosion of public trust in the regulator amongst rural and remote communities (exacerbated, for example, by repeated failure to meet deadlines for connectivity). It was proposed that 'rurality' should be built into regulation to ensure these areas are not an after-thought. There was a suggestion of taking a 'donut approach' to gigabit rollout where the hardest-to-reach areas are prioritised first.
- Members recommended that the Committee review previous ministerial commitments and Committee recommendations in relation to digital connectivity. It was also recommended that Members should look at other regulatory frameworks in other jurisdictions - particularly Ireland and Northern Ireland, which have vastly improved connectivity in rural areas.

Fixed link connectivity

The following areas were discussed in relation to fixed link connectivity:

- The A75 and A77 were noted as roads with significant strategic interest for the UK, and in need of improvement. Both roads serve the ferry port to Northern Ireland and carry significant HGV traffic. Accidents on these roads can force large vehicles onto B roads, creating additional problems. It was commented that there has been little engagement with the Scottish Government.
- Issues with the ferry service must be resolved before considering fixed links. It was commented that the current ferry service needs to double its capacity, even when operating normally. Poor ferry reliability means that young people will leave island communities as commuting to the mainland for jobs is impractical. It was also noted that adequate housing is needed for ferry crews.
- It was also felt that the current ferry services are run with a ‘mainland’ perspective, rather than an ‘island’ perspective, meaning the needs and priorities of islanders are not adequately reflected in the running of services.
- It was also noted that the case for fixed link connectivity is not uniform across the Scottish isles – in particular, it was felt that fixed links may be more feasible in the Shetland Islands, compared to the Western Isles, on account of the higher levels of economic activity in the former.