

Rural Services APPG

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services
3rd November 2020 at 10:45pm
On-line via Zoom

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

How to level-up digital connectivity to rural communities

PRESENT (Invited Guests)

Matt Warman MP (Minister DCMS)

Gareth Elliott (Head of Policy & Communications, Mobile UK)

MEMBERS

Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP (Ludlow) CHAIR

Simon Baynes MP (Clwyd South)

Jerome Mayhew MP (Broadland)

Anne-Marie Morris MP (Newton Abbot)

Lord Richard Best

Lord Ewen Cameron of Dillington

Lord Rupert Carrington

Lord James Crathorne KCVO

Lord John Taylor of Holbeach

Bishop Christine (Newcastle)

Jonny Haseldene (Senior Parliamentary Assistant, Anne Marie Morris MP)

Arthur Virgo (Office of Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP)

OBSERVERS

Paul Ashton (in attendance with Simon Baynes MP)

Caron Britton (Lead on Digital Connectivity, Rural Communities, DEFRA)

Ashleigh Eden (Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister DCMS)

Lizzi Hearn (Campaigns and Policy Officer (Housing and Economy, CPRE)

Sarah Lee (Head of Policy, Countryside Alliance)

Antony Morgan (Senior Policy Adviser, Shared Rural Network, DCMS)

David Partner (Rural Connectivity, DCMS)

Richard Swinford (DII, DCMS)

In attendance from Secretariat

Graham Biggs MBE (RSN)

David Inman (RSN)

Marija Aleksandrova (RSN)

1. Apologies for Absence

Richard Bacon MP (South Norfolk)

Scott Mann MP (North Cornwall)

Julie Marson MP (Hertford and Stortford)

Greg Smith MP (Buckingham)

Derek Thomas MP (St Ives)

Baroness Liz Redfern

Lord Robin Teverson

Bishop Alan (St Albans)

Chris Hinchliff (CPRE)

Bethan Aldridge - Minute taker (RSN)

2. Notes of Previous Meeting

APPG Meeting – 22nd September and Associated Papers (please see link below)

<https://rsnonline.org.uk/appg-on-rural-services-meeting-minutes>

Notes of the Meeting held on the twenty second of September on the Spending Review 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

3. How to level-up digital connectivity to rural communities

The Chair in opening the item referred to the Group's concern about rural areas where digital connectivity across the country was poor and other areas where it did not exist at all.

Speaker 1: Gareth Elliott (Head of Policy and Communications, Mobile UK)

Gareth explained that Mobile UK presented on behalf of the 3 companies (O2, Vodafone and EE) who built and maintained the networks which other companies then shared.

His presentation is attached [here](#)

He said the benefits of mobile and broadband connection and their role in business and social life had been made staggeringly clear during the Pandemic and the need for sustained future action was obvious.

He made the point that the Shared Rural Network (SRN) needed to be in constant dialogue with businesses across the UK and the Network wanted to be contacted by those businesses so that continual dialogue could take place.

He welcomed the APPG championing rural activity in the way it had and said that there were several ways MPs from rural constituencies could help make the SRN happen. They were:

- Reassure people about the unfounded rumours that had been circulated about 5G. There had been 130 Arson attacks on infrastructure.
- Encouraging digital champions
- Asking Local Authorities to be more proactive in their local plan processes about facilitating infrastructure around, mainly 4G based, connections and supporting relevant planning reform through the Planning White Paper processes.
- Supporting Business Rate Relief holidays for mobile as well as fixed infrastructure facilitation
- Accepting that a limited number of bigger masts would need to be secured in a few rural areas (although there was already capacity for much of the 4G required from the existing infrastructure and applications would not be common). Even then the larger masts would be smaller than those being required in other countries).

Simon Baynes MP agreed to share information he had recently received on issues the Operators felt needed to be addressed if the Government was to achieve its full-fibre roll-out by 2025, some of which may also be relevant to the SRN, and this would it was agreed be sent out with the Minutes – see Addendum.

Speaker 2: Matt Warman MP (DCMS Minister for Digital Infrastructure)

The USO 'launch' had taken place in March 2020 despite the pandemic situation. If a connection was made under the USO it was more than likely it would be way above the 10 Mbit/s minimum. So far, some 400 – 500 projects had been approved under the USO which when connected meant some 4000-5000 premises being connected under the payment threshold.

He commented on the ongoing discussion between BT and Ofcom over quotes assessing costs requiring to be met for connection and BT's compliance with their obligations as a result of their designation by Ofcom as a Broadband Universal Service Provider. The guideline that needed to be established was what was a reasonable ask given the local circumstance.

Originally it had been estimated that 600,000 homes might have to be involved in trying to calculate special solutions but as technology began to provide alternatives, this it was calculated, might fall to less than 200,000 homes across the country. An announcement would be made in the next few weeks There were however some difficult conundrums still occurring (for example, solutions that required sea cable would obviously continue to be very expensive). Discussions continued with BT to see if some estimates could be brought down, however.

In terms of financial certainty given the massive cost government had had to bear resulting from the pandemic the Minister said that the £500M commitment to SRN was "a done deal" and would continue as this scheme involved future emergency services use. The £5bn pot for broadband had been a Manifesto commitment so he was optimistic it would feature in the multi-year settlement of the Spending Review.

On the question of the switch from the analogue phone system to a digital system, which had been planned by BT, the Minister felt the Government would continue to be pragmatic. And in many areas such switchover would take “a very long time”. There was a pilot running in Wiltshire. Affordability would have to be a factor and some systems like the emergency call system for older people were likely to have to remain for the time being. It was for industry to assist here as it was in their interest for such a change to be occurring .

The Department were paying a massive subsidy for digital connections to public buildings and looking at possible broadening of the definition of the phrase public building as it had been employed to date. There could be a possible halo effect from doing that for once suitable broadband reached communities’ other private connections could benefit by its resulting proximity.

On the question of wayleaves whilst there was no magic panacea, it was hoped the Telecomm Leasehold Bill which was currently being looked at in the Lords might, if enacted, assist in trying to strike reasonable balances.

The Chair very much thanked the Minister for his time in coming to the APPG and the assistance he had given to it.

4. Date of Next Meeting

The Group had not yet heard back from the MCHLG about a Minister attending a meeting on the Planning White Paper and the Chair agreed this would be chased. It was hoped this might result in a further Group Meeting taking place during November or December.

ADDENDUM:

Information from Simon Baynes MP

- **Fair and equal access to infrastructure that is already in the ground**, so fibre builders do not have to keep digging up roads and people’s fields unnecessarily.
- **Support for recruiting and training the thousands of new staff this effort will need.** The overall fibre building workforce will need to grow by 70% in two years to get anywhere near this coverage.
- **Ensuring that all local authorities give permissions for industry to use the latest digging technology and that they issue area wide permits** that allow fibre to be laid quickly and efficiently.
- **Changing the rules for getting access to buildings and land.** The industry needs the same powers as other utilities. For example, the water industry has a statutory right to build across land and access buildings, along with a statutory compensation scheme for land and property owners.
- **Ending the situation where industry is actively penalised for investing in fibre**, because they must pay higher business rates on a fibre connection than they do on an older, much slower, copper one.