



# Revitalising Rural

 RURAL  
SERVICES  
NETWORK

Realising the Vision

## RURAL DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY





# Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

## The Rural Services Network

We are a membership organisation and we work on your behalf for rural communities.

The RSN is the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation.

Our membership comprises 116 rural local authorities plus over 210 other rural service providers and interest groups including Rural Housing Associations, Healthcare Trusts and Charities. We also have over 200 larger Parish or Town Councils in the Rural Market Town Group.

You can find out more about the RSN at our website [www.rsnonline.org.uk](http://www.rsnonline.org.uk).

We always welcome new members and if you are interested in joining the RSN, click here for more information. [Join the RSN!](#)

## Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision is a campaign run by the RSN, which sets out a number of policy asks in 14 key subject areas to help support rural areas to achieve their full potential, and to 'level-up' areas of historical underinvestment.

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# Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

## RURAL DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY



### Why it matters

Digital connectivity is a key enabler of business innovation and an important driver of productivity growth. Rural based businesses of all sizes and in all economic sectors (including the self-employed) need access to fast and reliable broadband and mobile networks if they are to thrive, compete and reach new markets.

Digital connectivity creates new opportunities for businesses to set up in or locate to rural places, bringing jobs and wealth to those areas. As the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated, it also enables home working from rural settings, which many employers may expect in the future.

Digital connectivity allows those who are on the move to stay in contact, download information and work remotely, in keeping with modern day expectations of business people, residents of all ages and (crucially, from a rural perspective) those visiting or holidaying in an area.

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Digital connectivity offers rural residents the option to access many services without having to make long or complex journeys. It has rapidly become a key means for accessing banking, education, and healthcare, to name just three examples. It can also help address rural loneliness and isolation.

Next generation digital connectivity will significantly help the Government to realise its levelling up aspirations in rural areas and to deliver its growth strategy (Build Back Better). This includes allowing businesses to innovate and enabling their workforce to acquire new skills.

In short, if rural communities are poorly connected, digitally, their ability for productivity growth will be constrained, causing them to fall further behind economically and to face social disadvantages.

## The national policy context

Key elements of national policy include:

- Broadband USO – a right giving households or businesses with a slow internet connection (i.e. a download speed below 10 Mbps) the ability to request a free upgrade, if the cost for BT Openreach does not exceed £3,400. They may have to pay costs above this threshold.
- National Infrastructure Strategy and Spending Review 2020 – in late 2020 Government announced a revised target that by 2025 a minimum of 85% of UK premises should have access to gigabit-capable connectivity (most using full fibre technology). The Spending Review made a firm public funding allocation of £1.2 billion for the period to 2025. This, however, revises down a previous Government aim to reach 100% of UK premises by 2025 and to use £5 billion of support for the roll out in uncommercial areas. Draft procurement plans include maps showing where contracts for gigabit roll out are expected to receive public funding subsidy. However, they state that plans for the most uncommercial rural areas remain “to be explored”. For further information see the RSN's [Through a Rural Lens document on the National Infrastructure Strategy](#).
- Project Gigabit – in March 2025 Government announced more details of initiatives to help deliver its revised target for gigabit-capable broadband. This included the first set of procurement contracts to reach roughly 500,000 premises in Cambridgeshire, Cornwall, Cumbria, Dorset, Durham, Essex, Northumberland and Tees Valley. It also included a relaunch of the Gigabit Broadband Vouchers Scheme, which offers funding towards the cost of a gigabit upgrade for households and businesses currently without a fast connection. Some 7,000 publicly accessible sites are expected to become digital hubs serving rural areas.





- Shared Rural Network – an agreement signed by the UK’s four mobile network operators, to share masts or permit roaming (between their networks) at locations where this can plug gaps in 4G coverage. This will occur mainly in remoter rural areas and, using £500 million public match-funding, will build new infrastructure at some ‘not spots’ currently unserved by any network. Government proposals, being consulted on, will change planning permitted development rights to allow for the building of taller phone masts, so making mast sharing easier.
- 5G test beds and trials programme – a series of pilot projects using emerging 5G mobile technology, to test its application at differing locations and in various economic sectors. It includes 5G Rural First projects trialled in Shropshire and Somerset, and a 5G Rural Integrated Testbed project trialling tourism, agriculture and other applications in Dorset, Nottinghamshire, Worcestershire and North Yorkshire.
- New homes – the Government plans to update building regulations so that new homes in future must have a gigabit-capable broadband connection, although a superfast connection may be allowed on sites where costs are high.

## The rural dimension

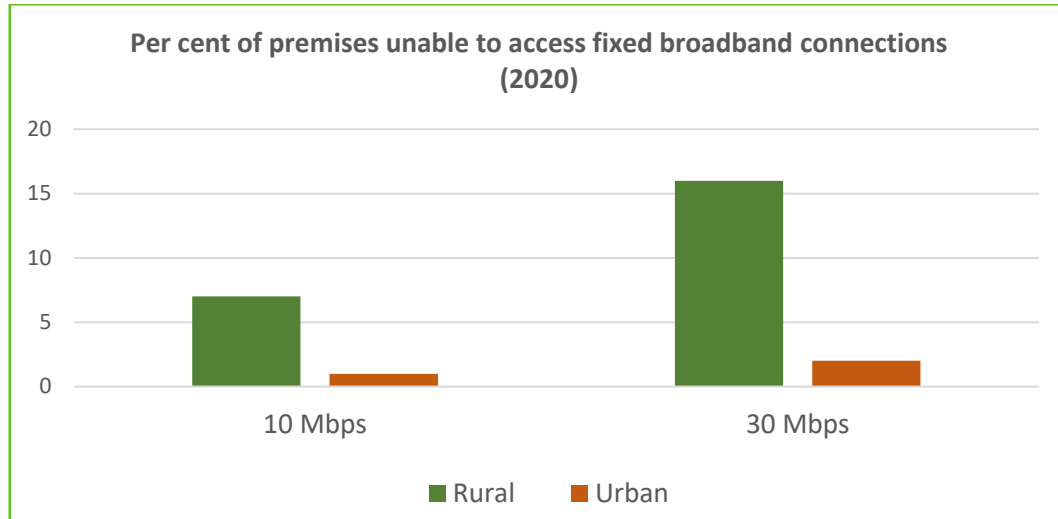
Broadband and mobile networks are clearly more widely available in rural areas than they were a few years ago. However, there remains some notable connectivity challenges to resolve.

Some 7% of rural premises (or 274,000 households and businesses) in England cannot access a decent fixed broadband connection of 10 Mbps.<sup>1</sup> This is the threshold set for the broadband USO, which the regulator (Ofcom) considers necessary for everyday use, though it is likely to prove inadequate for many business or home working users.

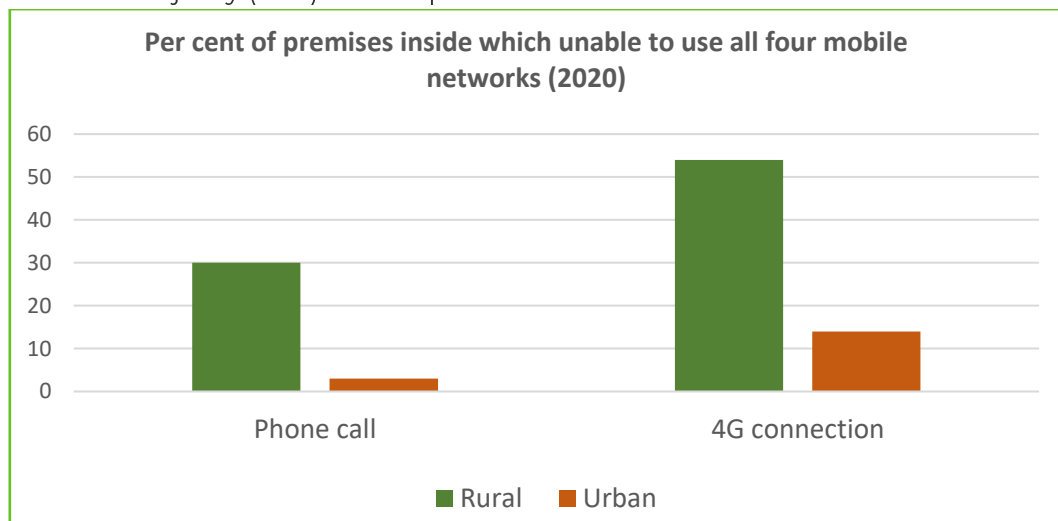
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<sup>1</sup> *Connected Nations – England report*, Ofcom (2020) for all broadband and mobile connectivity statistics.

Some 16% of rural premises in England cannot access a superfast broadband connection of 30 Mbps. A sixth of rural premises cannot yet benefit from superfast speeds.



There remain significant issues with mobile connectivity in rural premises. Some 30% of those in England are premises where it is not possible to make an indoor phone call on all four of the mobile networks (EE, O2, Three and Vodaphone). Similarly, it is not possible to get an indoor 4G connection on all four networks at a majority (54%) of rural premises.



The outdoor signal is notably better. However, complete 'not spots', where no 4G signal is available from any operator, make up 3% of England's rural landmass. Across 19% of that rural landmass it is not possible to access a 4G signal from all four networks.

During 2019 mobile network operators launched 5G at 40 UK locations on a commercially funded basis. All 40 of these locations were in large cities or towns. Unless public sector funding arrives quicker, rural areas will fall behind in the 5G roll out.

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Research from 2018 estimated that if rural based businesses could resolve their connectivity and other digital constraints, that would add a minimum of £12 billion annually in Gross Value Added to the UK economy.<sup>2</sup>

## Policy solutions

Given the experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, Government should underline its commitment to fast and reliable digital connectivity in all places, rural and urban, and its determination to see that quickly achieved. It should acknowledge that many rural residents have been left behind in a situation where home working, online meetings, online schooling and virtual (health) consultations became the norm. No rural pupils should find themselves disadvantaged in a lockdown, when schooling must be delivered online.

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<sup>2</sup> *Unlocking the digital potential of rural areas across the UK*, Rural England and SRUC (2018).



## Rural Digital Connectivity

### Specific policy asks

**Broadband USO:** the Government should urgently direct the industry regulator, Ofcom, to review and upgrade the broadband Universal Service Obligation, which (at 10 Mbps) is out-of-date and inadequate for, what have become, some everyday essential uses. To reflect the new normal the USO should be upgraded to superfast broadband download speeds of 25 to 30 Mbps minimum. Costs passed on to consumers seeking a USO connection must be reasonable. This would level the playing field for rural residents and businesses until gigabit-capable connectivity can be rolled out.

**Gigabit-capable connectivity:** the Government goal for universal gigabit-capable networks, achieved with public investment to ensure their roll out in unviable rural areas, is welcome. However, announcements in late 2020 that 15% of premises will be excluded from the 2025 target and that firm public funding for that period is reduced from £5 billion to £1.2 billion are hugely disappointing. Published procurement plans make clear that it is premises in highly rural or remoter areas which could again be left behind. This effectively abandons the outside-in approach which originally set out by Government in 2018. Government should work urgently with the telecoms industry to resolve any capacity issues and to bring forward the remainder of the £5 billion investment into the period to 2025. Digital connectivity will be key to levelling-up rural areas and their economies. All rural areas need a clear timetable for when they will receive gigabit-capable connectivity and remote areas with the worst connectivity should be first in line for that public investment.

**Mobile networks:** the Shared Rural Network initiative, to plug gaps in 4G provision, is helpful, if not a total solution. Delivery of this initiative must be carefully and transparently monitored by Ofcom, to ensure that network providers are on track to meet their objectives and targets. Options should also be explored to address any remaining mobile 'not spots' by 2025. Government should announce some further rural trials to pilot 5G connectivity within health and social care provision.

**Digital skills and inclusion:** Government should announce a fully funded Digital Inclusion Programme, so no citizens (rural or otherwise) are left behind due to their lack of online skills or their inability to pay for basic equipment and connection charges. Key strands are likely to include training and the recycling of IT. As recently highlighted by the Communications Consumer Panel, the Covid-19 experience has brought home just how important this issue now is, with some left isolated and struggling to access basic services, such as shopping, banking, education and health care. Although it will require national resource, this should be a locally delivered programme, involving statutory, private and voluntary sector organisations working in partnership.

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