

PE2127/B: Develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands

Petitioner written submission, 3 February 2025

The Scottish Government's submission of 20 December 2024 attempts to paint a picture of progress in digital connectivity across Scotland, yet the reality for many communities—particularly in the Highlands and Islands—is starkly different. While it is acknowledged that telecommunications is a reserved matter, the Scottish Government has repeatedly claimed leadership in digital infrastructure, yet its actions fall short of addressing the fundamental issues of digital exclusion, inequality, and slow delivery in rural Scotland.

The Ofcom Connected Nations Scotland 2024 report states "Scotland remains, by many metrics, the least connected of the UK's four nations."

We have the highest rate of 4G 'not spots' in the UK. The lowest full fibre access in the UK. The lowest rural residential superfast broadband coverage in the UK.

It's clear that many of these issues, whilst Scotland-wide, are much more acutely felt by communities in the Highlands and Islands and that's why this petition is asking for the Scottish Government to provide a dedicated, new digital connectivity strategy for the region.

Failure to Deliver on R100 Commitments

The Scottish Government's flagship Reaching 100% (R100) programme has faced persistent delays and underwhelming results. Despite promises to connect every home and business by 2021, thousands of premises in rural Scotland remain without access to reliable broadband. The Government's own data confirms that only 19,000 premises in the Highlands and Islands have been connected under the R100 North contract—far short of what is required.

The reliance on Openreach has proven inadequate, as evidenced by Ofcom's 2024 report highlighting Scotland's status as the least connected nation in the UK. It is clear that Scottish Government backed infrastructure rollouts must be accelerated, and we need to explore more diverse and competitive providers to drive meaningful progress.

Digital Exclusion Remains a Crisis

The Scottish Government claims that geography should not be a barrier to digital access, yet data from the Scottish Household Survey shows a clear digital divide. In the most deprived areas, 13.4% of households still lack internet access, compared to just 3.7% in the least deprived areas. The failure to provide universal, affordable broadband is leaving too many communities behind, exacerbating social and economic inequalities.

Lack of Transparency on Project Gigabit in Scotland

While the Scottish Government states it is 'playing a key role' in delivering the UK Government's Project Gigabit, the details remain vague. The timeline for procurement in the Highlands and Islands is unclear, and there is little evidence that Scottish Ministers are ensuring the alignment of R100 with UK-wide efforts.

A new digital connectivity plan from the Scottish Government would ensure improved transparency on Project Gigabit rollouts in Scotland and the Scottish Government's involvement, ensuring funding is targeted effectively to the hardest-to-reach areas.

Mobile Coverage and the Failure of S4GI

The Scottish Government claims success with the Scottish 4G Infill (S4GI) programme, yet its own figures show that only 55 sites were delivered—an insufficient response to widespread mobile not-spots. Ofcom's report highlights Scotland's weak rural 4G coverage, further proving the Scottish Government's failure to prioritise mobile connectivity.

While the Scottish Government supports the UK Government's Shared Rural Network (SRN), there is little evidence of meaningful engagement to expedite its delivery in Scotland. A new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands should also include a clear strategy to eliminate mobile not-spots and expand 5G coverage across rural areas.

A Vision for a better digitally Connected Highlands and Islands

The Scottish Government needs to tackle the digital divide head-on and should, as part of a new plan focus on:

- **Accelerating broadband rollout** by holding providers accountable for missed targets.
- **Expanding full-fibre coverage** to ensure all rural and island communities have reliable connections.
- **Tackling affordability issues** by addressing cost barriers for low-income households.
- **Enhancing mobile infrastructure** to eliminate not-spots and boost coverage in remote areas.

The Scottish Government's failure to deliver on digital connectivity is holding Scotland back. A new plan is needed to ensure that every community—regardless of geography or income—is part of the digital future.