

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

Rhoda Grant MSP written submission, 4 February 2025

This petition rightly calls on the Scottish Government to develop a comprehensive Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands that addresses the challenges and ensures equal opportunities for all, and I support this petition. This issue needs to be addressed and the more proactively this can be done, the more likely it can be successful. The petition would require the Scottish Government to create a plan on how to tackle the current inequality of digital connectivity the Highlands and Islands faces.

Reliable digital connectivity is now a necessity of life. Across all areas, there is an increasing reliance on online services to deliver basic facilities. So many aspects of business, healthcare, education, retail, and others can only fully function with good, reliable, and effective online connection.

The direction of travel towards online reliance is one-way, and will not slow down. With that, we become more and more reliant on good digital connectivity.

Innovation and development are leading us towards more devices connected to the internet, from smart home appliances, healthcare devices, to industrial sensors, which rely on fast and stable internet connections to function effectively.

The ongoing work to prepare Scotland to utilise and embrace new technologies reflects the importance of having good internet.

Yet, there is a digital divide in Scotland when we look at rural areas. Across the Highlands and Islands, many communities face slow broadband speeds, unreliable mobile coverage, and a growing digital divide when compared to urban areas. Some of the statistics that underpin this petition highlight the need for action. From the most recent Rural Scotland Data Dashboard, coverage from superfast or newer higher-speed services is consistently lower (superfast broadband coverage is 79% in rural areas compared to 99% in urban areas and gigabit-capable coverage is only 34% in rural areas compared to 80% in urban areas in 2023). Ofcom estimate that 18,000 premises in Scotland (residential and commercial) still do not have access to a 'decent' broadband service with speeds above 10mb/s via either a fixed or wireless network.

Good connectivity is inherently linked to attracting workers and families into the area and stemming depopulation. There is a domino effect to poor connectivity that poses an existential threat to the competitiveness of the Highlands and Islands.

We must be proactive to ensure that the region does not fall to further digital disadvantage, and a Digital Connectivity Plan would kick start a set of credible and practical actions for meaningful intervention.